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OLD SANT'S DARK DEAL;



OR,
**MINER MAT'S
IRON GRIP.**

BY WM. PERRY BROWN.
AUTHOR OF "BROOKLYN BOB'S BULGE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CAVE IN AT THE MINE.

MAT looked up at his father.
"But, suppose anything was to happen to you, father, what would become of the place?" he asked.
"It is hardly likely that I am going to die right away," replied the old gentleman; "we

AMONG THE HURLY-BURLY OF FRAGMENTS WAS THE FORM OF WALDROP
FLYING THROUGH THE AIR.

lawyers are proverbially long lived, you know, my boy. I am as much lawyer as farmer, am I not?"

But the sober-faced youth heeded not this mild attempt at levity. He was just starting for the coal mine, while his father was on the point of mounting his horse to attend the circuit court, then in session at the small town of Pennsboro, two miles away.

"Now, father, any one would think that, as a lawyer, you would be more careful about the ownership of this farm. I am sure we all hope that you will live for many years. But suppose you don't? What could any of us do about this deed of trust? Should anything happen to you, Sant Woodward or his heirs would do their level best to take possession. Then what would become of mother?"

While Mat was speaking, his father's good humor gave way to a sort of peevish impatience. He mounted his horse and looked frowningly down upon his eldest son.

"Look here, Mat," he exclaimed, "because you are nearly eighteen, you must not take to managing everything. Have I not said that as soon as court met I intended to apply for an injunction, restraining Woodward from doing anything until the amount of my real indebtedness to him is ascertained? Why, the man has been more than paid up already. All that is necessary is to prove the accounts."

"Yes, but proving accounts that have never been kept, except by old Sant himself, won't help our side of the case much. You know, father, you never would keep any accounts, or insist on having receipts for money paid out, while Woodward is as methodical as a clock."

"Oh, well, I haven't the time to argue with you now. But you had better quit worrying over my affairs, Mat. You've enough to do to keep the coal mine running. How many hands are you working now?"

"I have had the promise of two more, but they will only work by the day. They say getting out coal by the ton does not pay them well enough."

"That is the usual way with these green hands. All they care for is their day's wages. What they do to earn them don't seem to concern their minds at all. Now that coal is down to six cents a bushel, delivered, I cannot see how you are going to make anything while you have to pay these lazy fellows a dollar and a half a day. If we only had a railroad now—whoa, sir! What d'ye mean, you rascal?"

These last ejaculations were addressed to his horse, a fiery, nervous creature, disposed to shy or run at the flutter of a leaf almost.

"You had better ride old Moll," said Mat, whose anxiety now took a new turn. "Black Tom is most too frisky for a man of your age. He needs about a month's plowing to tone him down. Mother will feel easier—"

"Yes, yes. Your mother is just like you, Mat. A pretty pair of worriers you are, both of you." Then to his horse, "Get on, sir! Get on and be hanged to you!"

The lawyer spurred and checked the animal alternately, then dashed away amid a cloud of yellow dust toward the ford of the Little Sandy River, just below the house, which last was perched upon a gentle rise not far from the bank. Mathew Lang, as he again started for the coal mine, saw Black Tom plunge at a hand gallop through the ford and clatter wildly up the opposite slope under the vigorous spurring of Mr. Lang.

"Father isn't as active as he used to be," thought the son. "I wish he would ride old Moll."

After crossing a pasture he entered a corn field, having on one side the river and on the other a rugged hill side.

His dingy red mining shirt contrasted sharply with the bright green blades, as he followed the trail that threaded the bottom to where it turned abruptly into a shallow cove, round which it wound about, with an ever upward trend, until it reached the coal mine.

This last was nothing more nor less than a hole dug horizontally into the mountain side, about half way between the bottom and the summit. Following this some fifty yards, Mat came to a series of chambers, as they are called, from which the coal was dug.

Along the corridor leading to the open air ran a small wooden tramway, on which stood a couple of dump cars. At the mouth of the mine was a broad slide, down which the coal was precipitated to a lower level, where the teams that hauled it away received their loads.

In one of these gloomy chambers two men were drilling a hole for a blast. Mat looked at them for a moment without saying a word, then returned to the open air. Glancing down the slide, he noted the small amount of coal that was ready for hauling.

Two teams from Pennsboro had just driven up.

"Look here, Mat," said one of the teamsters, throwing off his coat, "if you are not going to get coal out any faster than you've been doing lately, I might as well quit hauling. There isn't a load apiece for me and Bill here now. Your men must be loafin' half their time."

"I begin to think so, too," returned the youth. "They ought to average at least five tons a day to the man, but they don't come near that."

"Paying 'em by the day, I reckon?" Mathew nodded.

"That isn't no way to mine coal. Up in the Pennsylvania region each miner has his stint, and he is paid by the ton. That's the way we ought to do it down here in Tennessee."

"I believe you are right, Burgess, but what is a fellow to do, when the men say they will not work any other way than by the day?"

"Send off and get new hands. That's what I'd do, even if I had to shut down for a week. Here you are, paying good wages for half work. Coal is way down and you can't stand it long. What is more, if you don't keep our teams going, of course we will have to quit hauling, ain't that so, Bill?"

Bill Ford, who was loading his wagon, gave an assentive grunt. At that moment a dull explosion sounded within the mine, that was followed by a gush of foul air and smoke at the mouth.

"Using dynamite?" asked Burgess, pausing from his own steady shoveling.

"Yes. It is cheaper and makes less smoke than giant powder."

"It's a treacherous creatur' all the same, 'specially in a mine. You never know just what dynamite is going to do. It jars the yea'th too much. Powder's safest, if it is a mite slow."

A rumbling sound was now heard, that was followed by a smothered crash; then another cloud of coal dust was expelled with great force from the mouth of the mine.

"A cave in!" cried Burgess. "And a big one, too, or that wouldn't be a flying so. What did I tell you about using dynamite?"

But Mat had already disappeared. When the rumbling first began, he real-

ized what was coming, and darted into the tunnel through the outward belching of dust, as fast as he could. Aside from damage to the mine he feared the men's lives might be in danger.

"Are you all right, boys?" he eagerly asked. Before he reached the first of the chambers, however, he met the two miners coming out.

"Yes, we managed to reach the tunnel," said one. "Just before the big cave in came, I heard the soap stone a crack-in'. That was after the blast was let off. I told Charley here he was tamin' it down too tight for dynamite."

"Looks as if the mine had fallen in," remarked Charley.

CHAPTER II.

MAJOR POWELL.

Mathew Lang heaved a deep sigh.

"Go on out, boys," said he. "I am glad you got through safe. I will go in and take a look."

"He ain't no gladder than I am," remarked Charley Snell to his mate as Mat went on. "This mine work isn't fitten for white folks to follow, anyhow."

By the time he had looked around, Mat was fairly appalled at the extent of the damage caused by the explosion. After a careful survey Mat returned to the open air, half suffocated and somewhat discouraged.

There, things did not look much better. The teamsters had loaded up all the coal in sight, and were grumbling because there was not enough out to complete their loads.

Charley Snell, the younger miner, openly avowed his intention of quitting work then and there. He was the son of a neighboring farmer, and had never worked in a coal mine before.

"I'd rather do farm work, where I can see the sun," he averred.

"Well, Mat," said Burgess, turning in his seat as he was driving off, "this sort of going on won't do me. I can get plenty of hauling over at the Holt Mine, though the town folks say they had rather use your coal."

"Hold on a minute, boys!" called Mat to the teamsters. "I want to see Tim Regan a m'ute."

He drew the older miner aside.

"I cannot make things pay here," he said to Tim in an undertone, "the way we are working now. Snell is bound to quit. He is the sixth green hand we've had in the last two months. They either get sick of it themselves, or they can't dig coal, and I have to fire them myself."

"They're a rotten lot, the whole kit and bilin'," replied Tim. "I'll tell ye what's so, Mat. Give me a couple of ould Lehigh Valley hands and I'll get out more coal in tin hours than any half dozen of these Tennessee mount'in blokes."

"If you will stand by me, Tim, I will try another plan. You will make more money, and so, I hope, will I, if I succeed."

"If there is money in it, you can count on Tim Regan, ivery time."

"All right. Go back to your work and don't be surprised at anything you may see or hear."

Tim nodded and Mat turned again to the teamsters, who had halted their horses and were curiously looking on.

"Burgess," said Mat, "I reckon you and Ford need not come back before Monday week. By that time I will try to have things in much better shape all round."

"All right, Mat. Hope you will, I'm sure. Don't know where you'll get hands,

though. Holt's got about all the good ones, except Regan here."

"I'll try to manage somehow," was all Mat said further, as the teams drove away.

Then he turned to Snell, who had been gathering together his things, preparatory to leaving.

"Four days and a half are what I owe you for, is it not, Charley?" said Mat, as he drew forth a grimy wallet. "Here are six dollars and seventy-five cents. That pretty near uses up my pile, but never mind. You may tell the boys that hereafter I shall pay off by the ton instead of by the day. Twenty-five cents will be the rate, and if they don't like it they will have to look out for work elsewhere."

"Divil a wan of thim will ye get at that price," commented Tim, who still lingered at the mouth of the mine. "But that is because they ain't after knowing how to mine properly. I suppose you'll be giving me the same terms?"

"Of course, Tim. I knew you naturally preferred to work by the job. I shall go over to Mannington and bring back some regular miners. Don't you say a word, but keep right on working. You shall be my foreman at fifty cents a day extra, over and above what coal you dig. How does that strike you?"

"Sure, it fits me like his hide fits a dog, bedad! I'm glad to see ye taking such a start, sorr. Good luck kape company with us! I'll shtick to ye in the pinch—begorrah!"

Then Mathew left, while Regan returned to his work, which now consisted in removing the debris that had fallen from the roof of the mine. On the way to the house Mat took out his purse and counted his money.

"My cash is getting mighty low," he reflected. "Yet I need money just now worse than ever. Father said, when he turned over the coal bank to me, that I need count on no further aid from him. He had never made it pay and he has little faith that I will. I must—hullo! I believe that is Lelia Powell. Perhaps she can tell me where the major is to be found."

Mat ran along the corn rows towards a glimpse of pink and white that went flitting down the road on the opposite side of the river. The weather was warm and the perspiration started, as he leaped the fence and hurried to the water's edge.

"Miss Lelia!" he called. "Oh, Miss Lelia!" Then, to himself: "Blamed if she won't get clear off without hearing me!"

But the girl was only riding to a convenient trail that led down the bank, and she presently reined up her pony in the shallow water near the shore.

"I am sorry to have to stop you," he began before she said a word.

"Can you tell me where I can find your father to-day?"

"He said he was going to Rural Vale. But if you only want to see him, what are you bothering me for?"

"Now isn't that rather tough? But I'm much obliged, though, for your information. Tell Bruce to come over, and we will try his new breechloader. If it scatters any better than my old muzzle-loading shotgun the squirrels had better hide out."

As Lelia rode off Mat waved his hat from the top rail of the fence. On gaining the road the girl dashed out of sight in a lively canter.

She was a rosy-cheeked, buxom lass of sixteen, and an old playmate of Mat's.

Bruce, her brother, was about Mat's age. Their father, Major Powell, was a one-armed Union veteran of the civil war. He owned a well-stocked farm, drew a snug pension, and was regarded as one of the solid men of the county.

Mathew, on reaching home, had his own horse saddled.

"Where are you going now, Mat?" asked his mother, a rather sad-looking woman of fifty, with thin, gray hair.

"Over to Rural Vale; then, perhaps, on to Mannington. Probably I may not be back before to-morrow night. Tell father I am away on business."

"I fear you will fail with that coal bank yet," commented Mrs. Lang, gloomily. "They say Holt is going to put coal down to three cents a bushel at the pit mouth. You've been getting three and a half, haven't you, Mat?"

"Yes; but I'll give Holt a good tussle before I knock under."

Old Dan'l, one of the ancient family servants, had by this time brought round the saddled horse. Mat, meanwhile, having washed and changed his clothing, bade his mother be of good cheer; then he mounted and rode rapidly away.

Dinner time found him at Rural Vale, where he intercepted Major Powell just entering the dining room of the one hotel the place afforded.

"Hello, Mat!" said the major. "Come over to this table. How is coal selling now?"

Young Lang made haste to seat himself beside Lelia's father, and the two ate their dinner together.

"Speaking of coal," continued the major later on, "that man Holt is selling a good deal, they say. Unless you come down a little, Mat, I reckon I will have to take my winter's supply from him. Must buy in the cheapest market, you know."

"Then I feel sure you will buy of me, major."

"Think so? Well, we'll see. Holt is a keen one, and you are green at the business."

"I am on my way now to Mannington after miners. I'm tired of green hands. I'm going to pay by the ton after this—make or break."

"Well, that is plucky. But I must be going. I've got to attend a tax sale over here."

The major rose, wiping his moustache. Mat accompanied him from the dining room.

"Come take a look at my horse," said Mat, as they neared the hitching shed.

"What for? Want to sell him, lad?"

"Not exactly. But I want you to loan me fifty dollars on him right now. Will you, major?"

CHAPTER III.

MAT GOES TO MANNINGTON.

Major Powell took a short step backward, as if a light missile had been tossed at his head.

"That sounds strange, Mat. Why don't you apply to your father?"

"I will be frank with you, Major Powell. At home they all fear that I won't succeed with the mine. I happen to know, too, that ready money is rather scarce with my father just now."

"Why don't you wait until you sell some coal before lunging into new experiments?"

"Well, you see, Snell has quit work. I have no one now but Regan. I need at least two more regular hands."

"Why did they quit so soon? Pay them regular?"

"They had their money every Satur-

day. But they don't like the work, somehow. Yet Holt seems to keep his own hands all right."

"Does, eh? Holt is an older hand at running coal banks than you, Mat. Wait 'til you've been at it a few years, then mebbe you'll drop on to a game or two. Holt is taking away your hands, my boy."

"Do you think so? I don't like to think that Holt would be so mean."

"It's only business, Mat—or rather Holt's idea of business. You inquire about a little. If you don't find some of your old hands working for Holt, I'm a false prophet. What do you want with this fifty dollars?"

"You see, I have taken a new stand, sir. I need about fifty dollars to see me through."

"Well, if you are too timid to strike your own father for the loan, looks like it would be foolish in me to hand over. How do you know that hiring more green hands will put you straight?"

"I am on my way to Mannington. I shall bring back some experienced hands and pay them by the ton. Tim Regan is in for this, and he is going to stick."

"And you offer me this horse as security? Suppose you fail in your fine scheme?"

"But I shall not fail, that is, if I carry out my plans."

"Which three men out of four hardly ever do. But I will do this for you, my boy. You shall have the money and as much more as you may need, and I will accept the horse as security, you to have the use of him while matters are progressing. If you succeed, you can pay me back whenever you get ready. Should you fail—"

"Then Miss Lelia will get Dick," interposed Mat, laughingly. "She told me she needed a good riding nag not long ago. There isn't a better one about Pennsboro than Dick."

Again the major looked very knowing, as he drew out his wallet and counted out fifty dollars, which he at once gave to Mat.

"I wish you luck, my boy. But if Lelia gets Dick, it will lower my opinion of your business sagacity considerably. So, you had best keep a level head and watch out for squalls, especially when Holt hears of your new move. You can send me your note of hand, when you get back home."

By this time Mat's horse was saddled. He mounted, and as he rode off the major called out:

"Get old coal hands, Mat. They're the best in the long run, if they do cost more at the start."

"The major is a brick," thought the lad, as he cantered on. "He didn't even ask me for a chattel mortgage. He evidently thinks I have some go in me or he would not have shelled out so readily. I must succeed after this."

A brisk ride of three hours brought him to Mannington, a lively little town on one of the branch railroads that intersect the Tennessee valley between Knoxville and Chattanooga.

At a bend of the road Mathew's horse shied violently as several workmen rushed suddenly from the bushes into the road. A heavy detonation followed, that gave the lad all he could do for a moment to avoid being run away with.

A ditch was on the lower side of the road, which Dick, in his prancings, seemed determined to back himself into, when the Cornish foreman of the gang struck the horse a sharp blow in the flank, causing the animal to spring toward the middle of the road, where Mat soon obtained the mastery.

"Thank you," said he to the man. "I wouldn't have liked hitting the bottom of that ditch. But I say, you men seem to be miners. Can you tell me where I can get a couple of good coal diggers for a job that will last the year round?"

The men eyed Mat with dull curiosity. "Do you want good men?" asked the foreman.

"I want experienced hands, and men who will stick to a contract when it is made."

The gang boss appeared to ponder. Suddenly he whirled upon the men still idling by.

"Git to work!" he shouted savagely. "Be the boss a payin' ye to loaf? Git to work, and binnot slow aboot it, nay-thur."

"Wheers thot job, ye're talkin' aboot so glib?"

"Over at Pennsboro."

The gang boss whistled and shook his head.

"Thot's clane out'n the world, lad. What's to do in the minin' line so far awaa from tha raal rood?"

Mat explained the situation, and his needs as clearly as he could.

Further conversation led to Mat being directed to a certain miner's boarding house. Before the day closed he succeeded in hiring two miners, upon what he considered favorable terms. Early the next morning he had them in a hack, together with their belongings, and on the road to Pennsboro.

He accompanied them as far as Rural Vale, where he took the lane leading to his own home, while the men went on to Pennsboro to secure a boarding place for themselves, and to report to Tim Regan at the mine the following day.

Mat passed Major Powell's trim brick house, but the doors were closed and no one was visible from the road. Presently he reached the river, along which he cantered easily until he entered the ford near the Lang house.

Crossing this he rode by the door to the stables, and was just about through blanketing and feeding Dick, when he heard a quick step. Then his sister Cora rushed into the stable. Mat could see that her eyes were red and that she was strangely agitated.

"Oh, Mat!" she cried. "Oh, Mat—Mat—"

"For mercy's sake, Cora!" exclaimed the boy. "What is the matter? Has anything gone wrong?"

"Haven't you heard? Don't you really know, Mat?"

"I have heard nothing that should cause you to take on like this. What on earth is it, sister?"

CHAPTER VI.

THROWN BY BLACK TOM.

Cora looked at her brother compassionately through her tears. The girl evidently regretted the shock she was about to give the lad. Then, with an effort at self control, she gasped:

"Poor father was thrown by Black Tom on his return from town last night. He had just crossed the ford."

"Thrown on those rocks at the bank?" gasped Mat, aghast with horror. "I tried to persuade him to ride old Moll. Is he badly hurt?"

"That—Isn't—the—worst," sobbed Cora.

"You cannot mean that father is—" Mat faltered.

His lips merely framed the fatal word, but Cora understood and burst into renewed sobbings.

Mathew hardly realized how he reached the house, but presently he was on his knees by a cold and silent form

that lay in the parlor. There he gave way to a grief that shook his frame, and wept with boyish abandon for a time.

The suddenness of the death and a vivid remembrance of his father's parting words and smile, scarcely thirty-six hours previously, were almost overpowering to his naturally affectionate nature.

"Mother," he faltered, as he felt her trembling hand on his shoulder, "this is harder on you than on any of us. We must try to comfort you as well as ourselves."

After a simple and touching burial service all that was mortal of the lawyer was consigned to the family cemetery on the brink of a ridge overlooking the Lang farm. In a few days the survivors began to think about the condition in which Mr. Lang's affairs had been left.

He had made no will, yet it was his wish that his property should be left in the hands of his wife in case she survived him, and the income therefrom be at her disposal.

He owned other tracts of land in the mountains, but all of his possessions were more or less encumbered. Mat thought of the deed of trust his father had spoken about and wondered if anything had been done about that.

Meanwhile, his own mining venture now absorbed so much of his time and energies, that, for the present, he refrained from attempting to disentangle the family affairs.

Money was needed at home, and now that his father's law practice had ceased, the coal mine would have to be the main dependence, for a time at least.

The new hands from Mannington understood their work, and under Regan's supervision turned out coal at a rate that had never been seen before at the Lang Mine.

Mat arranged for the purchase of a new dump car and a set of wagon scales for weighing coal in the wagon.

The extra expense was considerable, and another fifty dollars of Major Powell's money found its way into Mat's pocket, while the major filed away a second note of hand.

At the mine the dump was always full of coal, and the teamsters no longer grumbled. Mat, agreeable to his expectations, found that paying good hands by the ton was more profitable than wasting money on green ones by the day.

As the market was a strictly local one, the demand was necessarily limited.

Late one afternoon, while Mat was superintending the loading and weighing of a lot of coal for the county court house at Pennsboro, several men sauntered up to the dump and watched the operations going on. They wore a sullen air, that visibly increased as Mat, after making some entries in an account book, looked up and greeted them pleasantly, saying:

"How goes it, boys? Quitting work rather early, ain't you? I didn't suppose Holt would let you off so soon."

But Mat's good humor evoked no answering smiles. Just then Tim Regan appeared from the mine to replenish the oil in his lamp.

"Mebbe we are quittin' early, and mebbe we ain't," said one of the men. "But we've come over to have a little settlement with you, Mat Lang."

It was impossible to mistake the meaning of this utterance, or the surly tone of the speaker. The teamsters paused in their work to listen and look, as did Tim Regan, after refilling his lamp.

"You say you want a settlement with me?" exclaimed Mat.

"Yes, we're after that very thing."

"What about?"

CHAPTER V.

THE ULTIMATUM, AND MAT'S RESOLVE.

The man squared himself obstinately. "About the way you've been doin' here lately, a-takin' the bread out'n the mouths of your old neighbors and spendin' your money on strangers in a way that cuts us out'n keepin' jobs elsewhere."

"You will have to be a little more explicit, boys," said Mat. "How am I depriving you of bread or anything else that belongs to you rightfully?"

"By bringin' in these Mannington hands and puttin' down the price of coal, so 'at we home folks can't make a livin'. I never would 'a' thought it of you, Mat, as that you, born'd and raised on this place, would be the fust to turn again them as has know'd you all your life."

"Now, look here, Jim Waldrop," Mat replied. "You are talking nonsense, and I believe you know you are, too. There are seven of you here. How many of you, when I had you hired at one dollar and fifty cents a day, would quit work whenever you saw fit to do so, no matter how badly I needed your help?"

"You know we all have farm work to do at home," returned Jim. "It has to be 'tended to as well as coal diggin'. Ain't that so, boys?"

"Just so," said Mat, as the others assented to Waldrop's words. "But I had work here that needed to be done fully as much as any work anywhere. If I don't get my coal out in season it won't be sold—so there you are. Isn't that so, Burgess?"

The teamster, listening on his wagon seat, gently uncoiled his long whiplash over the backs of his horses, then as dextrously coiled it up again.

"Well, most folks buy in the fall, and it gets bad hauling along late in the winter."

"Of course it does," said Mat. "You and Ford were threatening to quit because there was no coal in the dump after that last cave in."

"Bet your boots, lad. When we're teaming we've got to keep hustling. Any fool knows that."

"Well, then, when the roads are good is the time for coal buying and hauling. Then, of course, it must be got out in time, and the dump must be kept full. I was bothered a good while because I couldn't keep it full, the way we worked under the old scale. I saw there had to be a change or I would go under."

"And a fine change ye made!" said Waldrop, scornfully.

"When that cave in came, Snell quit work on the spot and swore he wouldn't strike another lick. Others of you have done the same way at odd times, when you felt lazy or indifferent, and had a few dollars coming in."

"I reckon Bob Holt didn't used to find fault with the way we did. He ain't gone back on his old neighbors yet. Not much he ain't—I ganny!"

"I'll bet he does, though, before long, Jim. I am not in this business for fun, boys, nor to accommodate other folks. I am in it to try and make some money out of it, and I am going to manage it whatever way I think best."

"Big words them are," interjected another man, "but it is out'n a weak stomnick they're jumpin'. We-uns may get even with you yet, Mat Lang."

"If any of you fellows want to dig coal at one cent a bushel of eighty pounds, I'll take on two more hands for a month right now. Isn't that a fair offer?"

"We ain't diggin' coal that way," responded Jim. "I might as well say right here that you've got to send off

them Mannington hands or put 'em to diggin' at the old price of a dollar and a half a day. That's straight goods I'm givin' ye, and you'd better mind your eye."

"But my men are averaging nearly two dollars a day working by the ton. I fear they will hardly agree to such a change."

"Then let 'em go where folks is accustomed to dig coal by weight. We don't intend to have it goin' on about here much longer."

Matthew reflected a moment. Then he conferred apart with Tim, who seemed to speak with much earnestness, gesticulating violently the while. Presently Mat came forward again.

"I'm sorry, boys," said he, "that you persist in viewing things as you do, but I cannot see my way clear to make any change at present."

"Well, we've give you fair warnin'," retorted Jim Waldrop, angrily. "If you don't go back to the old scale you won't run your mine much longer under any at all. We mean business, Mat Lang, and you might just as well knock under."

An angry flush appeared on the lad's face.

"I intend to run my business to suit myself," he replied.

"Come on, boys!" called Waldrop. "We've given him jue notice. Now let him mend his ways, or watch out for trouble!"

The men went off, arguing their side of the case to Burgess and another teamster who, with loaded wagons, were driving slowly down the road. Mat accompanied Tim into the mine, where the hands were at work.

"Knock off a bit, men," said the boy. "I have a word to say, and I want your candid opinion."

"Aye, that he doos!" ejaculated Regan. "He's got mine a'ready, and if ye be good men and throe he'll get yours in the wink of a lamb's tail whin ye know all the facts."

"Now, boys, you have a steady job here and you are doing good work. In fact, these fellows about here ain't in it with you when it comes to digging coal. They know it, too. If you will stand by me, I will stand by you."

"We're wid ye and that inds it!" cried Tim. "To the dickens wid them same galoots, says I!"

"I have gone to some expense with this mine, and I must have it out somehow!"

"Right you are!" exclaimed one of the men.

"We'll stick by ye," assented the other one, and so the matter rested for the time being.

That night he rode over to Major Powell's and found Bruce, the major's son, at the front gate. Bruce was a comely looking young fellow a year younger than Mat. The two were great friends.

"Hello, Bruce! Where is your father?"

"He's around. Come in and sit down. We haven't seen much of you lately, Mat. That old mine absorbs you completely, seems to me."

"I've had a good deal to see to since father's death, and I've had to stick pretty close to biz. I wonder if I could see the major, Bruce?"

"Of course. I'll hunt him up," and Bruce marched away.

While Mat was wondering where Lelia might happen to be, Major Powell appeared.

"How are you, Mat? Glad to see you. How are things in the coal line?"

"I—I fear I shall have to beg you to extend me a little more time on those notes. That is—if you don't mind the delay."

The major darted a keen glance at the lad's face.

"All right," he returned, "just so you keep up the interest. But what is the matter?"

Matthew gave an account of what had happened at the mine, and re-emphasized his own resolutions concerning the future management of his business.

"Holt has probably had a hand in this," remarked Powell. "Do you think you will pull through all right?"

"I feel sure of it, providing they don't cripple me in some underhanded way. In that case, I will do the best I can."

"Well, Mat, you must be your own best judge in the matter. But if you let those fellows get the best of you, you are gone up."

"I don't intend being bested if I can help myself."

Miss Lelia came out about this time, and the major presently withdrew.

Bruce Powell also returned, and the three young people fell to discussing a picnic that was to come off on Walden's Ridge, near Pennsboro. It was agreed that Mat was to ride over and accompany Bruce and Lelia. "You might bring Cora along," suggested Lelia.

"She and John will be apt to go with the children in the carriage," said Mat. "Besides, we three will all be on horseback."

On the following Tuesday, the day of the picnic, when Mat rode over on Dick, he saw another young fellow with Bruce and his sister. This was Cole Woodward, a son of old Sant Woodward, against whom Mat had cautioned his father.

"How are you, Lang?" said Cole carelessly. "Looks as if the coal was getting into your complexion, old man."

CHAPTER VI.

BAD NEWS.

A savage retort was on his lips. Then a glance at Lelia's calm, truthful face made him ashamed of himself.

During the festivities Mat saw his brother John approaching through the crowd of merrymakers.

"Something is wrong with John," remarked Cora to Mat. "I think he wants to see you, don't he, Mat?"

John was beckoning to them eagerly. When he came up he drew Mat aside.

"Let Cora take care of herself for a while," said the younger brother. "You must come with me."

"Won't it keep, John?" asked Mat, hardly knowing what to think.

"No, it won't keep," returned John, dragging Mat away.

"Anything wrong at the mine?"

"Not yet; that is, not that I know of."

"Is mother sick?"

"N—no. But she is mightily worried. Sant Woodward is just about foreclosing on that mortgage, Mat. Mother is nearly wild over it. You had better come and see at once what can be done."

Matthew could hardly believe his ears. While he looked on Sant Woodward in a general way as a hard, mercenary man, still the oft-asserted word of his father, that the old-time debt had been more than paid, had impressed its effect upon Mat. He had thought that a final summing up of accounts between old Sant and himself would result in the surrender of the deed of trust, and assure the subsequent security of the place.

Sant Woodward, having bided his time, was now about to seize on the family inheritance.

"But they have not exactly downed me yet," thought Mat grimly, as he made his way to the court house at Pennsboro. "I will show them what kind of stuff I am made of yet, if I am in a tight place."

When he and John walked into the county clerk's office a little later, the first person he met there was Sant Woodward himself.

Sant was a short, thick-set, hard-featured man of fifty years or more. Mat approached him at once.

"Good morning, Mr. Woodward. I have just heard that you are beginning foreclosure proceedings on that old deed of trust. Father told me only a short time before his death that he had more than paid you back for the money you loaned him so many years ago."

Woodward, who was emerging from the sheriff's office close by, placed some papers in his pocket. At sight of Matthew he smiled in a half contemptuous manner.

"Well, Mat, of course, as you are managing things for your mother you must have the receipts to show. To be sure, I don't remember having given any, but then—a marracle might happen."

In Sant's crafty eye shone a mocking gleam, as if he felt that he had Mat there.

"A marracle might happen, you know," he repeated slowly, at the same time preparing to go.

Mat's face flamed indignantly.

CHAPTER VII.

IS OLD DAN'L A TRAITOR?

"I believe what my father said," exclaimed the boy. "He may have been careless in business matters, but he would not lie."

Sant Woodward made a quick step forward and clenched his hand as if about to strike Mat Lang. Then he seemed to remember the difference in their ages and also his own dignity.

"Boy, if you mean that as an indirect reflection on me, you are widely wrong. I can prove whatever I assert in this matter of the deed of trust. See that you have the money ready when the sheriff calls, or I will sell the very roof over your heads."

"No, you won't sell us out, Sant Woodward. Try your hand, and see what we will do!"

Sant wheeled in an instant, with a cold, crafty gleam in his eye.

"What will you do—fight the law?"

"You'll see!" exclaimed Mat.

"Let old Woodward alone," urged John, seizing Mat's arm. "Jawing back isn't going to help us any now."

"All right. But the old rascal was so confoundedly aggravating that I just boiled over. Couldn't help it, to save my life. Hello! there is the major. Bet he saw our racket, John."

Major Powell had been standing at an office door near by, and now came forward with a sort of knowingly inscrutable look in his eye. Sant Woodward had disappeared.

"What is the matter, Mat?" asked the major. "Is it about the deed of trust?"

"Yes. He is going to foreclose. I guess the papers are already in the sheriff's hands."

"Well, if your father really owed him the money—"

"But father assured me that he had more than paid up the original loan, together with reasonable interest. But father was always so careless in some things—"

"Didn't take receipts, I suppose? Well, unless he had some witnesses, it looks as if Sant might carry his point."

The word witness set John to thinking.

"I remember father once saying to mother in my presence that old Daniel knew of some payments being made."

"Why did not you or mother speak of this before?" demanded Mat. "Now, I think of it, old Daniel has been going over to Sant Woodward's a good deal of late. He says that he visits the negroes there, some of whom are old friends of his."

"That reminds me," interposed the major. "Bruce told me that as he was coming home from Pennsboro here the other night he saw old Daniel cross the ford leading toward Woodward's. It was moonlight, and Bruce says he saw old Sant ride down to where Daniel was standing, and that the two talked together for some time."

"It looks suspicious," remarked Mat.

"Bruce thought it unusual, knowing that your folks and the Woodwards do not have much intercourse, as a rule. So he watched closely, and he is certain that Sant took out his pocketbook and gave something to Daniel, who bowed, scraped and was profuse in thanks."

"Is Bruce certain that he is not mistaken?"

"I guess the boy reported correctly, though what the business was that brought about the meeting Bruce did not ascertain."

"I am glad you told me this, major. Daniel was father's body servant for years and knew a good deal about his affairs. But to think that the old fellow would play into Sant Woodward's hand stumps me altogether."

"Looks scaly, doesn't it? Bruce, more out of mischief than anything else, gave a whoop as he rode off. He said Daniel dodged into the bushes, while Sant spurred his horse and tore off up the other road at a round pace."

"What do you think all this means, major?" asked Mat anxiously.

"Can't say. Looks vaguely suspicious, though. While I have no positive proof that Sant is a dishonest man, I think he will bear watching. Keep an eye on Daniel also. Good day, boys; I must get on."

And Major Powell hurried on to the county clerk's office, as if he feared that he might say too much, if he longer subjected himself to Mat's questioning.

"Sharp boy, that," he reflected. "But old Sant will get the Lang place yet if Mat don't mind."

John went off, while Mat, going over to a shed where he had left his horse, mounted and rode slowly towards the first ford below Pennsboro.

After crossing the river he rode along the narrow valley and up the hillside to where the black, yawning mouth of Holt's mine burst through the green slope.

Several miners stood about the mouth of the mine and amongst them was Bob Holt, a long, lean, excitable mannered man, who was gesticulating vigorously as he talked.

As Mat drew near he saw that among the men were Jim Waldrop, Charley Snell, and the others who were most pronounced in their hostility to Mat's new method of mining coal.

Holt saw the lad first and instantly interrupting himself, extended his arm towards Mat.

"There is the fellow!" said Holt in loud tones. "Why don't you say these things to him? I am not responsible for cutting your wages down. If he will resume the old rate, I will go back to a dollar and a half a day. But while he

mines by the ton with old hands, I have got to cut down or go under—unless—"

"Unless what?" demanded a man, sullenly.

"Well, unless I, too, send off and get old hands like Lang's."

"Curse Lang!" exclaimed Jim Waldrop, slowly wheeling as he spoke, while all the men glowered at the boy, who was so near that he could not help hearing every word.

"To the mischief with him!" exploded another. "If he was a man, I would make him tote a licking or take one myself."

An angry flush mounted to Mat's face that slowly faded into the pallor of a desperate resolve as he compressed his lips sternly. But he said not a word, nor made any sign except to bow slightly to Holt.

"Be ye too biggity to speak?" inquired Dan Dever, a brawny West Virginian, in a scornful tone. "Bekase, if ye are, we might have a way of making you."

"I have no quarrel with you, boys," returned Mat. "If any of you want work, you know my terms—"

"To the devil with you and your terms both! For a nickel, I'd smash your face."

This was Joe, assistant engineer, and a brother of Jim Waldrop, who from the first had backed Jim up in his enmity to the new order of things.

The miners crowded forward around Mat as Joe Waldrop seized the bridle rein of the boy's horse and forced Dick back nearly to his haunches. Mat flung himself from the saddle to escape a possible fall backward.

"Joe, you fool!" shouted Holt, suddenly remembering that the engineer had begun pumping water into the boiler of his engine, which, through carelessness, had gone nearly dry of all but the expanding steam. "Get back to your work."

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO CONSPIRATORS MEET.

But Joe, intent only on assaulting Mat, paid no attention. Jim Waldrop, however, understood the dreadful meaning attached to Holt's words. He was nearest the pump, which stood on an abrupt rise almost over the boiler and engine.

Neither he nor Joe was a regular engineer. Jim sprang up the slope, while the struggle around Mat continued.

"Pump her! Pump her!" called Holt, half frenzied under a sudden fear as he saw the cap of the safety valve begin to oscillate. "Scatter, boys—"

A heavy detonation shook the air.

The rock over which Jim Waldrop was climbing received the full shock of the riven boiler and shattered engine. A great cloud of steam rose up, amid which shivered fragments of rock and iron work could be dimly seen flying about. Among this seething hurly burly of fragments was the form of Waldrop spinning through the air.

The pumping machinery was smashed into smithereens, and the group of quarreling miners were scattered as if a thunderbolt had fallen into their midst.

Mat's horse, terrified beyond measure, reared high, and striking out with his fore feet, brought Joe Waldrop to the ground with a wild lunge. At the same time the men, uttering cries of alarm, fell away, leaving Mat to contend with the frightened animal alone.

When Dick came down again he lashed out with his heels, then started off, dragging the boy, who clung manfully to the reins. For the moment no one heeded them and Mat was hauled a hundred

yards or more before he could regain his feet.

The dead weight of the lad at last brought the horse to a halt. Mat, though somewhat bruised from being dragged, and almost stunned by the explosion, managed to pull himself into the saddle again.

Then he rode back to the mouth of the mine, where the men were gathered about the prostrate figure of Jim Waldrop, over whom Joe, now recovered from his own knockdown, was making a great lamentation. Holt was surveying the ruin of his machinery rather grimly, and at the same time nursing a bruised arm that had been struck by a descending fragment of iron work.

Several of the men had received minor contusions, or had inhaled an unpleasant amount of the hot steam. Other miners came rushing from the shaft, and there was a great clamor of questioning and exclamations.

"Mr. Holt," called Mat, his anger giving way to pity, "if I can help you any let me know. I will send my hands over at once."

"Thanks, but I guess you had better keep them at home. My men don't like them nor their ways, and there might be further trouble."

"At least let me ride for a doctor. I am mounted, and Jim certainly needs one, doesn't he?"

Angry mutterings from the men still evinced that their feelings towards Mat were not softened. Holt himself sneered somewhat as he replied:

"I don't think we need you, Lang. Neither your presence nor offers are wanted here just now."

Then Joe Waldrop turned, and, with Jim's pale face on his shoulder, shook his fist at Mat.

"Look out for your own works, old man," shouted Dever. "Something is likely to happen there soon. D'ye hear?"

After going a quarter of a mile further along the main road, Mat wheeled his horse into a by path, or cut off, which led across the mountain to the Lang residence, on the river.

He had gone about a mile when he heard three low whoops issue from the thick shrubbery that clothed the rugged slope.

Something in the sound of the voice struck Mat as startlingly suggestive. He drew rein, dismounted, and led Dick out among the leaves, where the noise of the animal's hoofs would hardly be heard, and where the thick undergrowth would further fend off discovery.

"If I don't recognize that voice, shoot me," he said to himself.

Tying Dick, he approached nearer the path, and crouched behind a rock.

Presently the whoops were repeated, nearer at hand, and with an apparently greater degree of caution. Mat peering out from the bushes, saw a gray, woolly head appear through the shrubbery, some distance away, and look cautiously around.

Then old Dan's figure emerged, and advanced to the trail with evident caution. He looked up and down, shook his head distrustfully, then examined the ground, first adjusting a pair of old-fashioned steel-bowed spectacles.

"You old rascal!" muttered Lang to himself. "You are up to something that there is no good in, I'll bet a cake."

"I 'lowed I hearn a horse trompin' down de path," quoth Daniel. "Mebbe I'ze gittin' deaf—but sho! Ain't dish yere a horse track, and a fresh one, too?"

The old fellow became vaguely alarmed, and retreated into the bushes again, shaking his head dubiously.

"Must a been some one else went by," he said. "Won't do for any of de Langs ter ketch me loaferin' round yere."

"Well, not much!" ejaculated Mat ironically, though in a low tone.

Old Dan disappeared up the mountain side, and for some time silence reigned.

But Mat felt confident that the negro was still waiting in his place of concealment. So he possessed his soul with patience, until another sound of hoof-strokes broke upon his ear, coming down the trail from towards Pennsboro.

Three low whoops were again given up the hillside, and the horseman stopped. Mat moved forward, keeping himself well concealed.

His surprise was not very great when he saw that the new arrival was old Sant Woodward himself, nor was it increased as Dan came lumbering down the steep slope and joined the man.

Mat, hardly breathing in his suppressed excitement, crept on until he could not only see, but hear, all that occurred.

"I've been waitin' for you, Marse Woodward," asserted Daniel. "Why ain't you come sooner?"

"I was detained at the court house on business. Have you got the last of those receipts?"

"Fore Gawd, marse, I try ter git a chance to hunt 'em up, but somehow I allers find somebody in de room."

"You hoary old scoundrel! I believe you are playing me false!"

Sant sprang from his horse, and seizing Dan'l by the collar, shook him vigorously.

"Easy now, marse," chattered Dan'l, shivering between alarm and the strength of Sant's arm. "Ain't I doin' my lebel best?"

"Hanged if I know whether you are or not. Haven't you worked for these Langs all your life for nothing? Haven't you had more money out of me in the last month than you ever owned before?"

"All so, marse. And I'ze doin' my best, I tell you. I git those papers dish yere very night—see if I don't!"

"How can you tell them? You can't read. Of course, you had the other receipts safe enough, for Mr. Lang gave them to you to take home, and you simply turned them back to me, while I substituted others, that you gave to poor, simple-minded Mrs. Lang to stow away. But the last two receipts are by far the most important. I must have them—must, I say. They acknowledge a release in full of all demands against the estate, and render the deed of trust, under which I am now instituting foreclosure proceedings, null and void."

"Yes, marse," returned Daniel, without much more than half comprehending the meaning of Sant's last remarks. "I'ze fotch 'em. I can't read, I know, yet don't I know de secret hole in de chist where Marse Lang put 'em de very day he got holt of 'em? He 'low ter me, 'Dan'l,' he say, 'dish yere done clurs de farm outn all debt, for sho!' Dem was his very words. Den he ke'p on: 'Don't you say nuttin' 'bout dese papers, Dan'l, or I'ze wear you out. Kase why? Well, dey is all so keerless at home yere, mebbe dey git lost. By me by I takes 'em to de court house and puts 'em in de clerk's safe.' Dat's all he say. But bless you, Marse Woodward, hit wern't more'n a few weeks afore Black Tom throwd him, and I ain't said a word to nobody but you."

"And to me you came, you old rascal, shrewdly imagining that I would give something to have those papers back, seeing that you knew I bore the Langs

no very good will. And you have pottered along, bringing me the less important ones, and getting money out of me all the while. But no more will I pay until you fetch them—see?"

"I fotch 'em. You be yere dis time to-morrer, marse, I fotch 'em then, fo' sho."

"How do I know but you will come with the same old excuse? Couldn't you get into the room without being seen?"

"I'ze wait tel dey all gets to sleep dis very night; den I slips in. I will for a fac', marse."

"If you do," and old Sant held up a twenty-dollar gold piece, whereat Dan'l's eyes emitted a miser's avaricious gleam. "If you do bring them all, two of these yellow boys shall be yours—"

Mat was now boiling over with just indignation at the proof of so much treachery and deceit, when an interruption occurred that caused Sant suddenly to break off, and at the same time diverted Mat from his rather unwise purpose of prematurely denouncing the two plotters to their faces.

CHAPTER IX.

A THIRD PLOTTER APPEARS.

"Hello there!" came from the bushes behind old Sant and the negro, and on the side opposite to which Mat Lang was concealed.

The two conspirators fell apart, and Woodward's hand sought his pistol pocket, thus evincing the fact that he did not go about his nefarious purposes unarmed.

Old Daniel's face took on a muddy hue, and he evidently wanted to run, but a second word from the intruder stopped him.

"Hold on, Coony," said the new-comer, rising up and disclosing the features of George Dever, one of the malcontents in the schemes against Mat. "Guess I will have to talk to you two a bit."

From Dever's close proximity and his impudently knowing and familiar expression of countenance, Sant felt sure that the man must have overheard much if not all that had passed between Woodward and the negro.

"I don't know that I have any business with you," remarked Sant coldly. "I am not in the coal trade, my friend."

"But you seem to be in the bust up and drag down line, and so am I. Don't let us beat about the bush. I was waiting on top of the ridge to hear a squirrel bark, when I heard three soft whoops. I thought to myself that I would see what was up down here, so I crawled along, and laid down behind this log. Then I listened—couldn't help it—catch on?"

"Y-yo-you didn't hear nuttin' much out'n de way, I'll be bound," stammered old Daniel, more alarmed than ever.

"Nothing much. Oh no. I should snicker! Well, I guess if Mat Lang knew what I know now, he'd be apt to call in a constable quicker than scat. I know those Langs. Fight you at the drop of a hat, and drop it themselves, begad! if they thought you was up to any scheme against them. I don't cotton to Mat a little bit; but—well, he might make it worth my while, you know, to let him on to a thing or two. Hang it, Sant, you are a big man round here, but don't go to putting on airs just now."

"Those three rascals are well met," thought Mat, edging a little nearer, and looking down from the crest of a broad rock upon the men in the trail. "But I don't think I would give George more than a kick for all he can tell, at present."

Old Dan stood trembling and looking from one to the other in silence. In

his mind's eye he saw those darling "yellow boys" vanishing amid the frowzy atmosphere of Pennsboro court house, with himself in the prisoner's dock, and the Langs, with Mat at their head, pressing against him a criminal charge.

"Come, Mr. Woodward," urged George, dropping his bantering tone and drawing nearer still. "The truth is that you and this old nigger are in the same box with us. Let us strike hands together and do these Langs out of their mine, as well as their farm."

"I don't know exactly what you are driving at, George," returned Sant, in a more gracious tone.

"Well, it is just this, and don't you play high and mighty with me now, for it won't go. I've heard too much. What I am driving at is that some of us men have it in for Mat, and we are going to put a stop to his working Mannington hands by the ton, if we have to—"

Here Dever leaned forward and whispered the rest of his threat in so low a tone that Mat could not hear what was said.

Sant looked startled, and, glancing around seemed suddenly to arrive at the conclusion that their consulting place might be too public for some plans to be discussed in, after all.

"Hush!" he warned. "Enough of that here. I fear Dan and myself were imprudent in remaining so long in the path. Your presence proves that. Let us get to a more private place."

"Tell you what, gentlemen," interposed the negro, nodding at Woodward; "you meet me here to-night at eleven, stiddy to-morrer; that will be an hour after moon up. I will take you into Marse Mat's mine by de panther's cave. Inside der we can talk tergedder, bedout any one seein' or hearin'."

"And you will be sure and bring what we agreed on when you come?" demanded Sant.

"Oh, cut that whipping round the stump!" exclaimed Dever, half impatiently. "Don't I know that you mean those very important receipts, without which you can't go ahead, with your law proceedings against the Langs? Give us a rest."

"Well, well!" Old Sant was now anxious to close the colloquy on any terms. "We will meet here, as Dan says."

"I will fetch either my brother or one of the Waldrops, though Jim won't be able, I guess, after that blow up. I mean you fair, Mr. Woodward. Our interests lie together, and we have a fine scheme up that will help on yours. But, don't you go back on us, or—" George swore an oath, and shook his head menacingly.

"All right," growled Sant, half surlily. "See that you men, on your part, do not play me false, or you may hear something drop with a sickening thud."

"Rats!" ejaculated George. "You stick to us and we'll freeze to you—see?"

"An hour before midnight, then, it is," specified Woodward, as he rode back up the path towards Pennsboro.

George Dever shouldered off through the woods, whistling "Two Little Girls in Blue," and smiling to himself between the bars, as he paused for breath occasionally. He felt good over the luck that had brought him there and placed him where he could compel an alliance on the part of so prominent a citizen as was Sant Woodward.

Old Dan was far from feeling at ease with himself, both on account of Sant's words and because of the discovery by Dever of his treachery to the Langs, on whose place he had lived all his days.

"A pore old nigger like me have gotter save some money," he reflected, as he stood for a moment scratching his head, as he watched Dever disappear in the woods. "Dem Langs don't never give me none—dat is, none to speak on. What den? Den I hatter make hit in some other way—dat's all."

After this self-salving of conscience the old negro shambled on down the path towards the Lang farm and house. As he passed the upheaving rock beside the trail, behind which Mat was crouched, the boy had some difficulty in restraining himself from springing out and upbraiding the old fellow for his treacherous behavior.

But Mat had already laid out his own plan of action, one feature of which was not to let Dan know that he had been detected, until certain other phases of the plot had been revealed to Mat through the unconscious agency of the faithless old servant.

Old Dan had gone but a few yards when Dick, doubtless wearied by the long waiting, pawed the earth a little.

"What's dat?" exclaimed the negro, turning and looking back.

"The fat will be in the fire now," thought Mat, feeling sure that Dan'l would investigate the cause of the noise.

Dick pawed again. Dan's eyesight was not good, and he began to advance cautiously towards the clump of laurel, behind which the horse was tied. Mat saw, though, that the darkey, between inward worry and the suspense of his false position, was extremely nervous.

Suddenly a strong, strident screech rang out through the woods, causing the old negro to fairly jump in his tracks.

"Great Caesar!" he ejaculated. "Sound like one er dem crazy wild cats a scream-in', and me bedout a gun."

CHAPTER X.

SHADOWED BY THE BOYS.

The negro, casting one wild glance around, turned back, and went scurrying along the path as fast as his old limbs would carry him.

Then the boy went back to his horse, mounted, and rode slowly down the trail in Dan'l's wake.

"Confound his old soul! My poor father was good to the rascal for forty years. And now a little of Sant Woodward's money has turned him into a scoundrel."

The boy, after making somewhat of a detour, in order to avoid arousing Dan'l's suspicions, rode into his own yard with an unusually grave face beneath his hat.

Dan'l kept mostly to the kitchen, nor did he come out as usual to take Mat's horse, but waited until the lad had gone into the house before he led Dick to the stables.

"Mother," began Mat, "did you ever know anything in particular about the payments made by father from time to time to Sant Woodward?"

"No, not that I can now remember. Dan'l knows. Your father used to send him to Sant. But what is the use of it all? Captain Leach rode by, and said that Woodward had begun proceedings against us in the chancery court. We will be without a home, I know."

"I think not. At least, we won't leave here without a contest."

"What can you do, Mat? You are only a lad."

"Now, mother, I can do a good deal. In the first place, I have found out that father did get receipts from Sant, and, further than that, I am now in a position to ascertain what has become of them. Whatever you do, don't trust old Dan'l."

Thereupon Mat related to his mother

all he had learned concerning Dan'l's treachery, and gave her a brief idea of his own plans of procedure.

She was at first almost sick with amazement at Dan'l's duplicity; then she grew correspondingly indignant.

"The horrid old creature!" she exclaimed.

"Dan'l has placed himself in our power, and if we manage right we will not only euchre Sant Woodward, but find out where the final receipts are that release us from all money obligations to the man. We can also prosecute him for conspiracy and fraud."

"I hope you will come out all right, Mat."

When John returned, Mat took his brother aside and confided to him all that he had learned since parting from him at the court house.

"Crackity!" John also added a whistle. "What a jolly time there will be when it all comes out!"

"But you must keep mum. Mother knows, but no one else. I have bound her to secrecy. On no account must old Dan'l's suspicions be prematurely aroused. I shall want you to go with me to-night."

"Go with you? Where?"

"You will see. We may have trouble, and must arm ourselves."

"I will follow you, Mat."

"I hope to discover all the important plans of our enemies, and we must go armed."

After supper Mat told his mother that he and John would be absent for a time on very important business. She begged him not to run his head into undue danger.

"Be prudent, Mat."

"I will be as much so as possible, mother. But it is most important for us to shadow old Dan'l to-night. I think there is a design on foot to injure our mine, and that old Sant has joined forces with the fellows who are in that scheme."

"Yes, and they are none to good to use dynamite, Mat."

"I have brains enough to outwit that crowd, and I know it for a fact."

Thus Mat argued, and finally his mother became resigned to their absence, especially as there appeared to be a good chance of catching Dan'l red handed, as it were, in his traitorous work. The old negro's faithlessness was more odious to her than Sant's duplicity or the enmity of the miners towards her son.

While Mat attended to various minor preparations, John kept a furtive eye on Dan'l, who was hanging about the family sitting room. At last, while other members of the family happened to be out Dan'l approached John.

"I t'ink Marse Mat want see you, suh," he said at last.

"All right," quoth John.

Outside he tramped heavily a few steps in the direction where Mat was cleaning and loading a couple of pistols. Then he softly retraced his steps, and, kneeling down, looked through the keyhole.

Dan'l was bending over an ancient chest of drawers that had been in the family for several generations, and to which Mrs. Lang only was supposed to have a key. It seemed, however, that Dan'l had one, too, obtained doubtless years back, when he was a confidential body servant to his old master, now dead.

As the keyhole did not give a very good view, John mounted a chair, and looked through the transom. Dan'l, after some fumbling and searching, pressed a secret spring, and a narrow aperture opened at the back of the chest.

From this he took some papers, and stowed them away carefully upon his person. John noted the position of the spring as well as he could.

John dismounted and replaced the chair, then sought out Mat.

"He has taken out those papers and hidden them in an inside pocket," said John, all excitement. "I saw him open that old chest father always used, and he sprung a secret drawer, as if he had been there before. What next?"

"Go back. Don't lose sight of him, if possible, for a minute. I will relieve you presently. The rendezvous is at eleven, but he might slip away before we were aware."

John returned to his vigil, and Mat completed his preparations. From then on the brothers relieved each other in furtively keeping an eye on the darky until about ten o'clock, when Dan'l began to get restless.

By that time the family had retired from the rear of the house, and the two other servants were already asleep. Dan'l had spent the evening by the kitchen fireplace.

Once he retired to his own small log hut near, and by the light of a few pine knots, raised a hearth stone, and for a few moments gloated over a small bag containing his hoardings of money.

Mat saw the glitter of gold, and his heart hardened still more against Dan'l, for he intuitively knew that much of that treasure, so dear to Dan'l, must have found its way from Sant Woodward's bank account.

At half past ten Dan'l drew on a ragged overcoat and picked up his hat. Then he looked about carefully, to assure himself that he was not observed. But the boys were cautious, and when Dan'l picked up a walking stick and started he still had no suspicion that he was under strict espionage.

"Come on, John," and Mat, as he whispered, dropped a loaded revolver into his brother's overcoat pocket, retaining one also for himself.

"We may not need these," he added. "I am sure I hope we won't, but we are contending for our home with a set of unscrupulous scoundrels, who may not stop at violence should they find their plans thwarted and themselves unmasked."

"I guess some of them would not hesitate to do us, Mat," commented John, as the two cautiously followed the negro, who promptly took the same path along which Mat had followed him that afternoon. "We don't want to fight, but if we have to, then give 'em thunder, say I."

At the spot where Mat had overheard so much the negro paused. The night was clear, and the starlight sufficient to enable one to get about without much difficulty.

"Lie down, John," urged the older lad, dragging his brother behind the same rick which had screened him before. "I hear some one coming."

Steps came down the path, and two figures loomed into shadowy perspective. Before a word was said some object came crashing through the bushes.

"Gre't King!" ejaculated Dan'l. "Who be dat come dar?"

One of the new arrivals swore a deep oath.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RENDEZVOUS IN PANTHER'S CAVE. "Get up, you old fool!" exclaimed a voice, as Dan'l, in attempting to run, fell down. "It's only one of Lang's hogs. Don't you hear him snort? Get up and tell us where Sant Woodward is."

"Ain't come yet. Grashus! Is that sho' hit was only a hawg? I 'lowed it must be de booger man."

"Well, you 'lowed' wrong. What we going to do next? Sit here?"

"Yass, suh. We got ter wait 'twel Marse Sant get yere. Who is you two, anyhow?"

"I am George Dever, and this is Joe Waldrop. Jim is laid up from that blow up, or he would have come. Bob Holt is so mad over the damage he has sustained that I half believe he would join himself, if we were to let him into the game."

"Hiyo! What dat I year?" exclaimed Dan'l, still very nervous.

"It is a horse coming. I guess Sant Woodward is more than apt to be in the saddle. So light up your lantern, you old scare crow, and let us see where we are."

"Hit'll nuver do, marse, 'twel we'ze inside. Bless grashus! Dish yere is Marse Woodward, sure enough. Mighty glad ter see you, suh. And now let us be a gittin' insider de cave. Somehow, I been feel'n' creepy all night, jess like I bein' follired."

"You have not acted the fool and let any one know what you are up to, I hope," growled Dever.

"In cou'se not, suh. I only nachilly kinder upshot."

"Did you bring the documents?"

"I fotch dem ar papers, if dat what you mean. Now, suh, less get on, atter I hitch de hawse."

Dan'l accordingly led Woodward's horse into a near-by thicket, and, after tying him securely, led the way up the mountain side, followed by the others. Mat and John crept cautiously in the rear, venturing as near as they dared to.

"I know where Dan'l's taking them," said Mat. "They are going to the Panther's Cave."

"That is right under the mine, is it not?" asked John.

"Yes. Not many know of its existence now, as the outlet is very small and concealed by bushes. I dread to have him take those miners in there. Half a dozen sticks of dynamite well placed would cause the whole mine to cave in and fill up."

"Do you think those fellows would be so mean as to do a trick of that kind?" queried John.

"George Dever is mean enough to do anything. The Waldrops under his lead are not much better. Hello! There goes the light."

"Why should they put it out now?"

"They have entered the cave, stupid," and Mat pushed forward up the steep and rocky slope. "That is where the light went."

Crouching behind bushes, the boys heard the party enter the narrow orifice of Panther's Cave.

"Don't make so much cursed noise," fiercely ordered Sant, not relishing his company now any more than he had the prospect of it earlier in the day.

"I'll tell you what we ought to have done," whispered John, as the boys closed in after their prey. "We ought to have taken those papers away from Dan'l. If they pass into Sant's hands we are hardly apt to see them again."

"No, not if we let Sant get away with them. But I don't propose 'at he shall. Keep your weapon ready, John, and do just as I bid you, no matter what happens."

"Are we to go in on them—"

"No' yet. I must find out just what their plans are first. After that we will be governed by circumstances."

"Yes, but if old Woodward gets hold of those papers—" protested John.

"Don't you see that we must be in a position to prove some overt act on Sant's part, as the lawyers say, before we can proceed against him ourselves. If we see Dan'l give him the papers and take money from him, then we have a case against the old scoundrel that will make him drop his present intentions against us quicker than scat."

While speaking, the older lad, closely followed by the other, had crept inside the cave through a long, narrow passage, barely large enough to admit the body of a man.

Beyond twinkled the glimmer of Dan'l's lantern in a fitful way. The seam in the rock was crooked and irregular, though gradually increasing in size. Forward the boys went as noiselessly as possible, until the conspirators were again revealed.

The lantern was on the floor of a tolerably roomy cavern, and round it were seated the four men, gravely regarding each other in a watchful, distrustful sort of way.

Finally Woodward, who was growing more and more impatient of his company, turned to Dan'l.

"Come aside with me. You and I can soon transact our business together, then I must get home again."

Old Dan'l was willing enough, for he, too, was anxious to be off with the precious "yellow boys" in his pocket, but George Dever shook his head.

"That sort of game won't do. Ain't we all partners in this new deal, Mr. Woodward?"

"Partners!" exclaimed Sant dictatorially. "Not much. I came here because the appointment was made. But my own deal will be made in a few minutes; then I'm done. You are the ones who appear to want help. But, on reflection, I don't think I care to mix up in your mine controversy with Lang."

"Oh, you don't!" sneered Dever. "Well, I call that a rotten conclusion, after what passed between us this morning. But I think you will change your mind, partner."

"I would like to know why."

"Simply because if you go back on our scheme, I will split on yours. It would look nice, wouldn't it, for that little fraud of yours to get into court or the papers?"

"Fraud! What do you mean?" And Woodward, fairly hoarse with a rash and sudden spleen, raised his riding whip.

"Put that thing down, or I'll smash your face. What?" Dever blusteringly threw himself into a fighting attitude. "Draw your gun, Joe, and see fair play, while I punch this hypocritical old fool's head. Then we will expose him afterward."

"You forget that your scheme might be exposed, too," retorted Sant.

"Our scheme! What is it? Bet you a horse you can't tell. We haven't done anything yet, but you have. I can prove that, by what I overheard this morning, and I'll lay this old nigger has got something in his clothes right now that would land both of you in jail, were it made known that he had stolen it for the purpose of selling it to you. Better go slow, old man, and come to my terms."

"What are your cursed terms?" Sant was boiling with rage, yet he knew he was helpless.

"Do whatever you and Dan'l are going to do, in our presence. Then we will talk things over, all together. No she-nanigan, nor dodging, nor putting up jobs on each other."

"That I will not accede to, at all,"

said Woodward, who could not swallow his pride sufficiently to let them actually see him engaged in his fraudulent deal with old Dan'l.

But the old negro, seeing that trouble was impending, suddenly resolved he would disappoint Dever in that particular. Fear more than mere prudence now caused him to withdraw the papers from his pocket and toss them into a narrow passage through the rock, running at right angles to the one by which they had entered the cave.

Mat, watching these proceedings eagerly, motioned to John to remain on watch, then he softly stole through another small seam. This took him circuitously into the nook where lay the small bundle of papers.

Meanwhile a lively racket had started up in the main chamber of the cave. Joe Waldrop had seen old Dan'l's action and at once suspected treachery.

"Stop that!" he called, at the same time grasping Dan'l by the collar and leveling his pistol at Woodward to prevent the latter's interference, should Sant care to intervene. "He has pitched something out yonder, George. Rush in and pick it up."

George obeyed. Just as his form darkened the mouth of the aperture, John grasped the package of precious papers. Dever saw the dim outline of a half prostrate figure and instantly divined that others were at hand.

"Drop it!" he shouted, and cast himself forward upon Mat. "Drop it on the instant, I say."

Mat saw what was coming. As his hand seized the bundle he drew himself back quickly. Dever came down upon the rock floor of the cave, but one hand fell on the lad's leg and grasped that member instantly.

The boy's position was perilous. With the sudden alteration in the situation caused by Dan'l's action, Mat perceived that his best plan was to secure the papers.

Having gotten possession of them he resolved to remain unknown to the others, if possible.

Mat pulled and twisted, but Dever's grasp was firm. He could see the outline of the man's head against the light beyond, while the boy's figure was practically invisible.

He saw that severe measures were necessary. Joe was calling to know what was up, while Sant, held by the pistol against his will, was swearing impotently, and Dan'l dumb with terror, looked on aghast.

Mat at last raised his pistol, and struck Dever a smart blow with the butt of it on the head. The man groaned and his grasp slightly relaxed.

In a second Mat had wrenched his ankle free, and was slipping through the narrow interstice that led back to the passage by which the cave was entered.

"Murder!" yelled Dever, recovering and darting forward only to bring up with considerable force against the rock wall.

George, who had never been in the cave before, was nonplussed. The pain of his bruises enraged him, and he roared like a wild beast as he groped about fiercely in the semi-darkness.

"What in thunder is the matter?" called Waldrop. "Have you gone crazy, George?"

"Hanged if I know," growled Dever, emerging into the main chamber with his hands clenched and blood trickling from his forehead. "I think the horned devil himself must have charge in this place."

CHAPTER XII.

A DYNAMITE PLOT.

"And he seems to have been afoul of you, mate," rejoined Joe Waldrop, lowering his pistol. "Did you find anything?"

"I found this," pointing to his bleeding head. "I guess the old coon did not throw anything away, after all."

"I guess you butted the wall, matey," commented Joe, coolly.

"Butted the nation! Some one or something struck me, I say. Then I made a rush and found nothing but rock."

"You were scared," said Woodward roughly. "I guess you are a good bluffer, my man, but not much more."

"Go in there with the light and see for yourselves, men," urged Dever angrily. "I tell you I got hold of something like a leg. Then something hit me. D'ye reckon I bled myself?"

"What did you throw away, Dan'l?" demanded Joe, turning suddenly to the negro. "Was you trying to fool us a little bit?"

Dan'l looked appealingly at Woodward, who seized the lantern.

"What is the use of all this yow-yow?" he grumbled, creeping in to where the struggle occurred. "I don't see anything or anybody. Dever is only a great big bag of wind. Let us get back out of here."

In his own mind Sant came to the conclusion that Dan'l had merely feigned to get rid of something in order to deceive the miners and avoid a row. By keeping up the impression, they could go on with their consultation, and later on he and Dan'l could effect their private exchange of papers for money with each other when they were once more alone.

Dever knew that some one or something had been in there. But the laugh was against him, and even Joe was disposed to ridicule his persistent assertions.

"Oh, rats, George! You are always lunging and slunging about. It is a wonder you did not get a worse bump, as it is."

"But I tell you, there was some one there!"

"Mr. Woodward says he found nothing and nobody. Dan'l 'lows he was only fooling, eh, coony?"

The old negro, who now believed that Sant had possessed himself of the papers when examining the aperture, and that Dever had, in his haste, plunged against some obstruction in the darkness, mistaking it for an enemy, nodded corroboratively.

"Let us get out of here, then," reiterated Woodward, anxious to have a chance of consulting with Dan'l unobserved and securing his spoil in the shape of those vanished papers.

"No, we won't get out," said Joe decisively. "At least we won't until George and myself have had our say, and we have arranged our scheme against this blasted mine overhead."

"I tell you I want nothing to do with it," exclaimed Sant, remembering that as the whole place might soon be his it would be against his own interest to have the mine injured.

"Your wants, Mr. Woodward, are not what we are now considering. Don't forget that you are, in a measure, in our power. We are going to blow this mine up."

"What have I to do with blowing up the mine?"

"Well, we want to have you present. You are a prominent citizen, and if any-

thing goes wrong your money and influence might help us out of a bad scrape."

"I'll see you and your crowd in Hades first," began Sant.

"Hardly. But I will give you your choice," Waldrop emphasized his words by shaking one finger menacingly. "Court meets next week in Pennsboro. Shall George, here, go to the district attorney and tell him what he heard going on between you and this nigger? They would have him to the grand jury room in the wink of a sheep's tail, especially if Mat should happen to be there to push things on. Will you now join us?"

"But I can turn informer, too," Sant suggested.

"We have only talked. You have acted and we can prove it. I dare say if they had old Dan'l on the gridiron in the jury room, he, too, would be scared into some admissions that would look very unhealthy for you."

"Don't spute with 'em, Marse Sant," pleaded Dan'l. "I knows a heap too much for any—"

"Shut up, you fool!" yelled Woodward. Then turning to the men he added, "Go on with your say. I can listen, even if I don't agree."

"You shall agree or do worse," quoth Dever bluntly. "We want the use of your name and presence, and we are going to have it; so dry up and let us get to business."

Woodward, seeing no present release for himself, resigned the idea of getting away with Dan'l for the present, and folded his arms gloomily. "Go on. You can bring a horse to water, you know, but—"

"Stow that, and let me talk," interrupted George. "When our partners come they will give three owl hoots. We can then join them down by the trail. Now, what we want to know is, where is the best way to get into this mine without going round through the shaft?"

"Why not go throo de shaft?" asked Dan'l uneasily. "I ain't know mucher 'bout dish yere mine nohow."

"Oh, yes, you do. That's why we ask now. Tim Regan has taken to sleeping in the shanty, and he has a dog that no one can pass. If the mine is blown up, it must be done without leaving such a trail as fools can follow."

"I ain't know mucher 'bout dish yere mine," repeated Dan'l, half sullenly.

"Now what is the use of setting your woolly head that way?" expostulated Joe Waldrop. "Tell us what you know. There is a way up into the mine from here. Haven't you been raised on this place?"

"Mebbe, but dat ain't no sign I knows much."

"It's a sign that we are about done fooling with you two," growled George Dever. "Show us the way, or take the consequences. As for you," to Dan'l, "I will have a constable after you tomorrow. What you have already done in robbing the Langs for Woodward here is enough."

"Shall I, Marse Woodward?" quavered Dan'l, again shaking with apprehension. "Shall I tell 'em what I knows?"

"Tell and be hanged!" grumbled Sant. "So I get what I am after, we cannot help what else is done, it seems."

The old negro hesitated still. Though he had stolen secret papers for the sake of money, he shrank from adding to the first injury the further crime of showing the way to a second one.

"Stir your stumps!" ordered Dever

impatiently. "First we know Snell and Rogers will be here with the dynamite."

"Come on, den. I can't help myself. You can see dat Marse Woodward."

Taking up his lantern old Dan'l started toward the other end of the chamber, followed by the two miners.

Sant would have remained behind, pleading fatigue, but Dever insisted on all going, placing himself in the rear to insure the fact.

Scarcely had they disappeared through another opening seam that trended upward, when a slight noise was audible in the direction of the entrance that led to the outer air.

Then a bearded face became visible, as the slide of a miner's lantern was cautiously withdrawn.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHERE ARE THOSE PAPERS?

It was the face of Ben Naylor, one of the Mannington miners working for Mat. Satisfying himself that the chamber in the cave was deserted, he came forward, looking carefully about.

"Lucky it was that Tim happened to be going through the mine," he reflected. "We've been expecting trouble. Good thing he sent me round to the cave this way, instead of coming down from the mine through the seam."

"Now that I've heard what they have said, I might as well skip back and tell Mat. Then I'll go to Tim, who darsn't leave the mouth of the shaft for very good reasons. I think Tim, Shep and me will be on hand when that same blowing up comes off."

Then Ben Naylor disappeared as quietly as he had appeared.

After a time the conspirators returned still quarrelling in a subdued way among themselves.

The two miners bore some tamping tools.

"Time's passing," remarked Dever. "You get to work, Joe. About four charges will do, I guess."

The miners worked for a time in silence, drilling places for the dynamite. Sant looked on in sullen silence. Dan'l was timorous and miserable.

It had been determined that, by placing the charge at the back end of the cave, the shock of the explosion would not only wreck the flooring of the mine, but cause the roof to generally fall in.

Presently three owl hoots sounded down the mountainside without.

"Light me out, Joe," requested Dever, throwing down his drill. "The nigger can hold for you while I am gone. I'll fetch in the fellows."

"I'm sho' I don't," muttered Dan'l to himself. "Seems like 'nough mischief bein' done bedout—"

"Here is your money," interrupted Sant's hoarse whisper in Dan'l's ear as Joe left them for a moment to light Dever out of the cave. "Give me those papers—quick!"

As Dan'l felt the cold touch of the "yellow boys" in his palm, the luxury of feeling was neutralized by a thrill of terror.

"Ent you get 'em, marse?" he stammered. "I 'lowed you get 'em when you go een dar," pointing to the aperture where he had cast the package. "Fo' Gawd! Ent you gottum marse?"

"No!" shouted Woodward, fairly frantic with angry amazement. "How should I have them? Did you really throw them away?"

"I trowed 'em een dar, marse, kase I 'lowed dem chaps would make me show up. Deed I did, marse. I 'lowed you gottum when you went een dar."

"Thunderation!" Woodward seized Dan'l, and shook him fiercely. "What stupidity! Give me that money—"

The reappearance of Waldrop with the lantern compelled Sant to desist. Dan'l, shivering like a leaf, still felt vaguely comforted. He had the "yellow boys" in his pocket. If he could only keep them there!

"What's up?" demanded Joe. "Quarrelling again? Here, you nig. Bear a hand with that drill. We have no time to lose."

Waldrop seized the sledge and resumed his task, while Dan'l held the drill in a clumsy way.

"Don't shake the drill so when you turn it," commanded the miner. "If this sledge hits you, nig, it is good-by John. Somebody will get hurt."

So Dan'l held as best his shaking fingers would allow him to, while Sant Woodward fumed in silence.

Waldrop's heavy blows were half deadened in sound by the close, mephitic air of the cave.

Woodward's feelings were like those of a suppressed volcano. Yet with his rage mingled an under-current of fear. Suppose that some one else had really entered that seam where Dever received the blow on the head.

"At least they cannot directly incriminate me on that charge," he thought. "I have not had possession of them. I can deny everything, and my word will be as good as theirs, I guess."

And now in came Dever, followed by Snell and Rogers. They bore a well-wrapped package, which was laid down with exceeding care.

"Boys," remarked Dever, coolly lighting his pipe right over the bundle, "there is stuff enough in this bundle to blow us all into perdition in a wink of a sheep's tail."

"Get back, then!" ejaculated Sant gruffly. "Such idiots as you are should never have a hand in anything of importance."

Dever's reply was a blow straight from the shoulder. His patience had already been exhausted by Woodward's previous behavior.

But Sant was equally ready. Though a much older man than his antagonist, he was as quick as a cat and as hard as steel.

He ducked slightly and the fist of George plumped itself against the empty air. Before he could recover Sant had him by the throat and was raining blows on his face with his free hand.

Snell and the others separated the combatants. Dever was wild.

"Let me get at him!" he cried. "Let go, I say!"

"Oh—hang it—hush!" growled Waldrop, as they tugged with the frantic man.

"Turn him loose," ordered Woodward, in whose hand now gleamed a pistol. "If he lays a hand on me, he shall eat lead!"

At length they got George down, and Rogers sat on him hard.

"Now, boys, let's get at it," said Waldrop. "We have two more holes to drill, and time is precious."

So the work went on. So busily engaged did they become that it was not noticed how or when Sant presently disappeared.

Rogers and Dever, with their squabbling, engaged Dan'l's attention. The others were drilling away.

Woodward, spurred by an ungovernable curiosity, once more entered the seam where Dan'l had thrown the papers.

He warily struck a match after he had brought up against the rock wall, holding it in such a way as to conceal its light from those in the outer cave as far as possible.

A rapid glance over the smooth, sandy bottom assured him again that the papers were not there. Then he stepped backward to cast the expiring gleam of light yet further around.

The wall seemed to give way behind him, and, stumbling, he struck his side against a projecting angle that threw him sideways into complete obscurity.

He fell, landing on a smooth flooring, the earthy smell of which rose to his nostrils. Then he heard a voice in the main chamber.

"Where is Mr. Woodward?" it said. "Durn his picture! He has flunked, ab-squatulated. Let me hunt him up."

But Sant had no mind to be captured again by Mr. Dever, so he crawled hurriedly in the opposite direction along the narrow, crooked seam, through which Mat had gone when the boy intercepted the papers.

Bumping his way on, regardless of the scraggy walls, and thinking only of escape from those he had abandoned, Woodward suddenly felt a whiff of cool night air.

At the same time a slide was drawn in a mining lantern and a sharp gleam fell on his face. Then his throat was seized in a vise-like grip.

"Make the least noise and you are a dead man!" whispered a menacing voice, as he felt the chill muzzle of a pistol pressed against his head.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT HAS BECOME OF JOHN LANG?

Then the slide closed with a snap and the spark of light went out.

Other hands took hold of him, and, with the pressure of the weapon still against his temple, he was dragged a few feet and thrown down.

Looking up, he saw two dark forms stand over him. He was at the mouth of Panther's Cave.

"Guess he had better be tied and gagged, hadn't he?"

"No, the rest of our men are near. We can turn him over."

These words were enigmatic enough to Sant. He only knew he had been captured by unknown people and that he had best be quiet. His pistol had already been taken away, and presently he was being pushed down the mountain side.

Meanwhile, what had become of Mat Lang?

For an instant after the recovery of the papers which he did not doubt would release him from the unjust tyranny of Woodward's claim on the estate, he hugged them in mute delight.

Then, stowing them away in an inside pocket, he made his way back to the main passage.

"John!" he called in a low whisper. "Oh, John!"

There was no reply.

Mat felt around, then opened for an instant the slide of the small mining lantern he carried.

But the place was vacant. His brother was not to be seen.

"What can have become of the boy?" thought he, completely nonplussed by this unexpected disappearance. "Can he be at the opening outside, I wonder?"

Making his way to the open air, he looked and felt about, but soon ascertained that no one was there. In his anxiety he scrambled down the hill side to the trail, hardly sensible that he might be followed when the result of his skir-

mish with Dever was made known to the others inside.

He dared not call out, for he did not know but that more of the disaffected miners might be on watch outside.

For some time he remained there, keeping himself concealed in the bushes, while listening and looking as best he could.

Then a dim form appeared down the path. It cautiously approached the spot where Mat lay concealed, and turned up the hill side in the direction of Panther's Cave.

Something familiar in the man's slouchy, stooping gait caused Mat to whisper:

"That you, Ben?"

The man stopped and dodged behind a tree.

"Who speaks?" he replied, in the same guarded manner.

"Mat Lang. What are you doing here at this time of night?"

"By the powers! And it is you, is it? That's lucky. Shep has just gone to your house to rout you out."

"What for? Have you heard anything?"

"There's the devil's own job on hand this very night. Tim got wind of it about bedtime through a friend of his who is pretty thick with the Holt crowd. They are going to blow us up before morning."

"I knew something was up. That is why I am here. Have you seen my brother John?"

"Nit! Haven't seen any one but Tim and Shep. Tim's on guard in the mine, and Shep went to your house, as I said."

"Tell me the particulars of what Tim heard."

"Well, there's the two Waldrops, the two Devers, Snell, Rogers and two or three or more. They have fixed it up to put dynamite where it will do the most good. That is Panther's Cave. Your nigger, Dan'l, gave the location away some time ago."

"George Dever, Joe Waldrop, Sant Woodward and old Dan'l are in the cave at this minute. I left John on watch there not more than an hour ago, while I went after some papers that Dan'l had brought there for Woodward and had put aside lest the others should see them, I suppose. When I got back John was gone."

"That's odd. But what would a rich fellow like Woodward want to mix in with such a scheme as this mine blow-up, eh?"

"Woodward is only after those papers, but he was drawn into their company by their overhearing him and old Dan'l this morning. It is a vile plan to rob us of the estate father left, but I think we will block that game before long."

"What shall I do? Tim sent me here to look about, see what was up and go back and report."

"Well, then, you had better slip up to the cave and take a look. Dan'l may take them up into the mine, he has turned out so complete a rascal. After you are through come back to me. Then you can report to Tim. Don't let them see or hear you, Ben!"

"What will you do, Mat?"

"I must remain on watch now that John has vanished. If they go to drilling and placing the dynamite, they will have to get away before it goes off. Then I may be able to rush in and put out the fuse."

"Hadn't I better stay by and help you, lad?"

"Well, no. They are too many for us to fight, and one can put out the fuse

as well as half a dozen. John may come back. So I guess you had best return to Tim, after taking a look, and tell him everything. You and he can look after things in the mine. If you can spare him, you might send Shep to me, but tell Tim to do as he thinks best."

Ben Naylor therefore slipped into the cave, took a brief look as we have seen, listened to the conversation going on inside, and saw Dan'l lead the party through the secret seam up into the coal mine above.

He then reported to Mat what he had learned, and went over the hill to the mouth of the shaft on the other side. Going in, he rejoined Tim Regan, who, from his own place of concealment, had witnessed the appearance of the party from the cave and had listened to their conversation.

Mat, remaining at his post, and still wondering what had become of John, saw Dever descend the hill side shortly after the owl hoots had been heard some short distance up the trail.

When Dever returned, accompanied by two more men, Mat's anxiety increased, as the three, passing close to his place of concealment, made straight for the cave. He saw that one of the men carried a bundle very carefully.

"That must be dynamite," thought the boy. "Including these two new ones, that makes six of them inside. Too many to tackle at present. They may overpower Tim and Ben. Confound it all! What can have become of brother John?"

Mat, feeling that unknown dangers were increasing, returned to the cave and took a brief survey. The conspirators had begun drilling for the blasts.

Some noise in the woods below attracted his attention and diverted him from a momentary idea of presenting himself inside, pistol in hand, demanding to know their business, and denouncing the whole crowd.

The lad returned to his post on the trail, and almost immediately became aware that the sounds he had heard were made by another party now approaching.

By this time the extreme brilliancy of the stars overhead had so increased the chance of seeing things that one's vision was tolerably clear for the hour and place.

At a turn of the trail Mat saw one after another of the newcomers file into shadowy outline against the background, until he counted eight forms, most of them carrying guns. All were on foot but one, who was on horseback and at the rear.

"Good heavens!" thought the boy. "If these are coming to help those scoundrels I might as well give in. They will make us prisoners, if necessary, and do their work to suit themselves."

At this juncture Sant Woodward's horse neighed.

"What is that?" exclaimed a voice.

"Somebody's horse, of course. Did you think it was a fiddle?"

This sarcasm brought out a low laugh. The party had, by this time, approached so near that Mat felt his blood tingling with irrepressible anger at the sight of so many dim forms, come, as he supposed, to do him injury.

"Hang them!" he thought, casting prudence to the winds. "I will give them a bluff anyhow."

Seizing his pistol, he advanced into the trail, with the weapon raised and hand on trigger.

"Halt!" he called out, in low metallic tones.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ADVENTURES OF JOHN.

It is now time to go back to John Lang, who was left on guard within the cave while Mat went after the papers.

Scarcely had his brother disappeared in the side seam of the rock than John heard a scarcely perceptible sound from the mouth of the cave. He turned and listened acutely.

"S-s-s-t! Oh, Mat!" was what next came to his ears.

Without further thought, he went to the mouth of the cave, catching as he passed a faint sound of the scuffle that had begun between Mat and Dever. But as he pushed his head out, he was seized by the shoulders, thrown down and a gag thrust into his mouth.

He struggled desperately, for John was game, but the two figures that had seized him were easily too strong for his youthful muscles.

"Let's pick him up and lug him down into the bushes," said a voice that seemed to belong to one of the rough miners of the neighborhood.

So John, with a gag in his mouth and his hands tied behind him, was pushed down the hill side to the trail and led some distance to where a cross gully headed, just at one side of the path.

There he was carried into a clump of bushes and bade to remain, after his legs had also been stoutly bound. Strange to say, the men did not take the boy's pistol, apparently forgetting or not caring to make a search.

"Now, Mat," said one, "if ye move hand or foot for an hour we'll be back and do for ye in great shape."

They still mistook him for his brother. Yet, as he failed to recognize the voices, John felt that he was probably not much acquainted with either man. Evidently, however, they were in the scheme to blow up the mine. Presently the two began talking.

"What will we do next?" asked one. "Wait for the dynamite or go around to the shaft and meet the others inside the mine?"

"Reckon we might as well go around. There'll be enough of us at the cave."

"Where be those Mannington chaps?" "At their boarding house, of course. Nobody knows of this scheme but those as is in it. Regan himself is in bed, I guess."

"He sleeps in the shanty at the mouth of the shaft. Perhaps we had better go over the hill and fix him and his dog so as they won't interfere."

"Right you are, me covey," and, with a few more threats addressed to John in the name of Mat, they left.

John had also ascertained from other words let fall by the pair that Mat's presence in the cave was suspected by them, as they had listened at the cave mouth for a few minutes after their arrival. They had intended joining Dever and Waldrop, but, feeling that the latter were being watched—supposably by Mat—they resolved upon the boy's capture, with the result that has just been described.

The delay consequent upon this caused them to change their intention and go over to the shaft, as they argued that with the arrival of Snell and Rogers, now about due, Dever's party would be sufficiently strong for all practical purposes.

Left alone, John began to see if he could not free himself. At last he managed to loosen his hands from the hastily adjusted cords by rubbing the bonds against the sharpest edge of rock he could find.

To remove the gag and free his lower

limbs was easy after that. He stretched himself, rubbed the sore places where the cords had pressed too heavily, then considered what he had better do next.

He had about concluded to return to the cave, when it occurred to him that Tim ought to be warned. If too late to warn the foreman against the danger now threatening him, John felt that he should, at any rate, be assisted.

Mat, though alone, had this advantage—he was watching instead of being watched. For all that John then knew, Tim might be in total ignorance as to what was going on at the end of the mine.

"I will hurry over to the mouth of the shaft," he thought. "If Tim is all right, I can come back to Mat."

John, it must be remembered, did not yet know of the presence of the two Mannington hands, whom he supposed to be asleep at their boarding house a mile or more away from the mine. He knew that Tim and the dog had taken to sleeping at the shanty before the mine's mouth, but he knew nothing as to Regan's having had intelligence concerning the plot that was being developed this night.

John had his pistol, but no lantern. His progress over the hill top to the mouth of the shaft was, therefore, rather slow amid the darkness. But he hurried on as fast as possible.

Some distance above the shaft he paused. A dog was barking furiously. Then a sound of voices broke upon the air.

"Those two rogues must be already after Tim," thought John. "Hang it, I wish it was not so dark!"

But the boy plunged down the mountain side recklessly, at times stumbling over impeding logs or tree roots, until he emerged into the cleared space around the shaft.

"Get back with ye!" shouted a hoarse voice, tinged with a slight Irish brogue. "I know what you're up to—begobs! Sick 'em, Nero! Sick 'em, dog! Take that, will ye—dom your eyes!"

John was about to rush forward to Tim's aid at once, when he heard a heavy fall. The boy peered over the bluff close to the mouth of the shaft.

He heard Nero give a sharp yelp of pain, as a bright light and a sharp explosion saluted his senses.

"They have flung a mining torpedo at the dog," he thought. "The cruel cowards! Hello! It's all up with Tim, I fear."

By the flash of light that for an instant illuminated the scene John saw four or five men holding down Tim, who was struggling hopelessly. Nero ran off limping.

From the position of the parties it would seem as if Tim had been assaulted by all of them on emerging from the mine, followed by his dog. Evidently the two men who captured John had found other confederates when they arrived.

Tim, returning from his tour of the mine, had been thus surprised, notwithstanding his vigilance, which had mainly been directed toward the party in Panther's Cave.

Tim had also heard the drilling going on, and was expecting the return of Ben and Shep with, perhaps, Mat.

"I must help Tim," thought John, grasping his pistol and making ready to leap down into the midst of the struggling group.

But as he was about to carry out this rash though plucky intention, he heard something stirring on his left.

"Who goes there?" he sung out in low, firm tones. "Halt, or I fire!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE DARK.

"Friends," came back to the boy, in the same guarded sort of voice.

"That you, Naylor?" asked John.

"Us it is," said Ben, stepping forward, accompanied by Shep Staines. "Tim's in a hole, ain't he? Where did you spring from?"

A few brief explanations were made, then Shep, a bold, daring sort of fellow, threw down his hat and shook his fists.

"I'm for tackling those blokes," he exclaimed. "What do ye say?"

"Say!" John waved his revolver. "I was about to jump in when you first saw me. Will you both follow?"

"Three is better nor two," quoth Ben. "Let us go for 'em hot."

With a wild whoop, Shep Staines whipped out a pistol and started down the bank. John was by his side.

By this time Tim had been tied and was being carried into the shanty, when the three descended upon the party like a whirlwind.

"Drop that man!" called Staines, flourishing a club in one hand and his pistol in the other. "Hur-r-r-o-o-o! Down with the Holt fellows! They're no good anyhow."

"Club 'em!" called Ben.

Shep knocked one surprised man down, and John, though but a boy, did the same by another. Then Ben found himself involved in a hand to hand struggle with the largest of their opponents, who also had a revolver.

Each one grabbed his adversary's pistol arm, and the two, being about equal in strength, struggled for the mastery.

"Good for you, lads!" called Regan. "Loose me, wan of ye, and I'll break the head of two or three of these spalpeens."

John, stepping across the body of the man he had knocked down, attempted to reach Tim. Shep also did the same thing, and had already laid hands on Regan's bound arms, when the fourth man of the Holt crowd struck Staines a swinging blow with his miner's lantern, smashing the light, but dropping Shep in his tracks.

"Sick 'em, Nero!" cried Tim, as the dog, having recovered from its scare, returned to its master. "Go for him, pup! Steboy—there!"

At the instant Staines fell Nero nipped the leg of the Holt man, so that the latter turned with a savage oath. Hitherto both sides had refrained from using pistols from instinctively precautionary reasons.

But the pain inflicted by Nero's teeth was too much. The Holt man fired, just as John struck up the barrel.

"Take that!" roared Regan, as the ball flew wide, enraged yet more over this attempt to kill his dog.

Though prostrate on the ground, the foreman raised both of his bound feet and suddenly kicked out, striking the Holt man full in the stomach, doubling him over as he reeled backward.

"Undo me, lad," called Tim. "Quick, afore the galoot gets his cussed breath again!"

John had his pocket knife out, and in a twinkling Tim's bonds were severed. The Pennsylvania Irishman leaped to his feet, uttering a yell, and straightway ran to Naylor's relief.

After that came a few brief moments of hand to hand fighting, with sticks, pistol butts and fists. The two parties were about equal in number, but the attacking party now had the advantage of greater confidence in themselves.

The others, finding themselves attacked at a moment when they felt sure of having things their own way, lost

their advantage, and experienced a corresponding droop of spirits.

The release of Regan operated strongly against them, for the foreman was a natural rough and tumble fighter.

"Down with ye, ye ugly divil!" he cried, springing upon Ben's opponent and bearing him backward, at the same time grasping another one by the neck. "I'll sound your heads for ye, bad luck to the feet that brought ye here!"

The crash of their colliding heads was audible to the others. But the Holt miners were plucky, and did not give up without a severe struggle.

Finding themselves blocked from any other way of retreat, and shrinking more and more from the fiercer onslaughts of their foes, they fell back into the tunnel of the mine, where the darkness swallowed them up.

"Hold the mouth, boys," said Tim. "We must have a light."

Regan darted to a box near the entrance and distributed several small miners' lamps to the others, also some matches.

"Don't light them yet," he added. "We'd only be marks for them to shoot or throw coal at. Let us follow them slowly, making no noise, and giving them no chance to escape this way."

"We have them penned and whipped," whispered John. "But there are others of them on the other side. Suppose they join forces and come back at us two or three to one?"

"By me sowl! I think I am a match for any two of them. Ben and Shep here are good for two apiece more. You can eat up at least wan of the divils, and—choke me windpipe—if Nero cannot chaw up another. So—there ye are. What more would ye have?"

All of the party had pistols but Tim, who had been robbed of his weapon when first overpowered. They advanced cautiously up the shaft, or tunnel, listening for their enemies, and making as little noise as possible themselves.

A deadly silence had taken the place of the sounds of conflict. Occasionally a slight sound from the interior of the mine denoted that the retreating miners were still on the move.

At last John, who was a little in the advance, felt the side wall along which his hand was gliding as he groped forward give way suddenly. Almost at the same time a muttered word from Regan betokened that a similar thing had happened on the opposite side of the shaft.

"Draw together, boys," whispered Tim. "Yet don't l'ave the passage open. We've gone as far as it is safe to go just at present."

"How so?" inquired Staines impetuously. "Why not go on?"

"And while we are going on, what is to hinder them same galoots from slipping by us and l'aving the mine? Have ye worked here so long and don't know we are at the inside ind of the tunnel?"

"By the Lord, you're right, Tim!"

"Line up then, boys, and every man be ready. Them chaps may make a rush yet—d'ye hear?"

The others signified their readiness in the same whispered tones as they ranged themselves in position to guard the tunnel and prevent a retreat of the men who had attacked Tim so savagely.

"Begawd! I want to see who they are by lamplight or daylight," said Regan to John, whose position was directly behind the foreman. "I can lick them in a fair fight, let them come wan by wan."

"There is another outlet by way of Panther's Cave, you know."

"Aye. But it isn't many as knows of it, lad. Anyways, we will have to take

the chances of that. Later on I'll find a way to light things up and let us see where we are."

"Meantime we'll hold the tunnel till hades freezes over, eh, Ben?"

Shep spoke in a laughing humor now, for a sense of danger usually increased his flow of high spirits, and the knock he had received only made him the more eager to get even. Ben's reply was a punch in the ribs, as a hint for Staines to keep quiet.

An interval of silence ensued, during which John could hear his own heart beat more loudly than usual. He was not afraid, waiting there in that dense darkness for the probable assault of an unseen foe, but was filled with a repressed excitement that made his veins tingle as if his senses were exhilarated by strong wine.

"Whist, lads!" muttered Tim. "I hear them coming. Stand like men, as ye are!"

Certain slight shuffling sounds were audible in front and also a hint of stray whisperings.

"I don't hear the drilling going on any more," whispered Tim. "When I made my first round after those blokes went back I was certain I heard something of the sort."

"Suppose they have everything in readiness to blow up the mine?" asked John, suddenly remembering what he had heard concerning the bringing of dynamite. "Are we not in danger?"

"Not so much as them fools we druv in here. Niver you fear, lad. When they go to use their dynamite we'll see some sign of it, be sure."

But there was where Tim's over confidence led him somewhat astray, as will be seen later on. John still remained uneasy, but as the others gave no sign of being afraid he was ashamed to say more.

Meanwhile the shufflings and whisperings had grown louder and nearer. Regan pulled a roll of cotton from his pocket, saturated it with oil from his lamp, after wrapping it around a small lump of coal; then, lighting it with his back turned toward the foe, he suddenly flung it among the gathering Holt men in front.

The sudden blaze disclosed them not more than thirty feet away, armed with pieces of coal and their pistols.

"Look at the rashcals, boys," cried Tim. "Look out!"

A shower of coal and a yell of angry surprise betokened the unwelcome nature of this unexpected illumination. Then sundry flashes broke the after darkness that were accompanied by sharp reports.

John felt a stinging sensation in one leg, and he realized that he was bruised from a flying missile of coal.

The Holt men charged with a yell. John heard the sounds of savage conflict wax loud and close. Tim, now at his side, seemed to be contending with two or more.

"Give it to them!" shouted the plucky foreman. "Down with Holt's cubs, and be blamed to 'em!"

The pain, noise and excitement roused the Lang blood. In an instant John was fighting in the darkness like a wildcat with an unknown opponent, regardless of his own wounds, and only conscious of a half insane desire to kill, maim or destroy.

"Don't let a dog of them out!" added Regan, who was always in his element in a free fight. "Give them what Paddy give the droom!"

Both Shep and Ben appeared to be fully engaged. Pistols went off. Snarls

of anger or groans of pain were occasionally heard.

At last the fighting gradually ceased. John alone was still trying to down an antagonist bigger than himself, when Regan struck a match and lighted his lamp.

The Irishman was seated on one of his foes, who seemed to be nearly insensible. Both Ben and Shep had a man apiece on the ground. Blood was flowing from wounds here and there.

John Lang alone was having trouble with his man, who at this juncture jerked loose entirely and ran down the tunnel.

"I'll stop you, begobs!" said Tim, calmly levelling a pistol he had wrested from his fallen opponent.

At the weapon's crack the man limped a step or two, then fell.

"Wan of the divils is gone," quoth Regan, calmly. "I heard him push by me immejutely this shindy began."

John was beginning to feel weak after the sudden cessation of extreme exertion, when a light appeared at the furthest end of the mine.

"What's that?" exclaimed Shep.

"Boys," declared Regan, in a thrilling accent, "I'm jubious but something is going to happen."

The light rapidly approached, swinging to and fro.

"Run! Run, everybody!" shouted a clear, shrill voice, keyed up to a high, nervous pitch. "Out with you—every mother's son—friend or foe! The mine is about to blow up. It's D-Y-N-A-M-I-T-E!"

The last word was fairly shrieked forth in a terrible tone.

Then Mat Lang, bareheaded, and with dilating eyes and frenzied movements, staggered into the midst of the astonished group.

CHAPTER XVII.

"THE BRAVEST DEED I EVER SAW!"

When Mat Lang commanded the approaching party of men to halt, he was uncertain whether he had to deal with friends or foes. He rather anticipated the latter.

"Stop!" reiterated the lad, cocking his weapon. "I will certainly fire if you advance further."

"Hold on!" exclaimed a voice from the rear, as the man on horseback pushed to the front, at the same time removing the slide of a dark lantern so that the rays illuminated the surrounding group.

"Major Powell!" exclaimed Mat, surprised, yet overjoyed. "Of all men, you are the last I expected to see."

"Well, you see, Bruce here heard through Shep Staines that an attempt might be made on your mine to-night."

"I remembered what Bruce had heard before, and—well—we got up these men—my farm and work hands—and came along as soon as possible. I hope we are not too late."

"I guess not. They were drilling in Panther's Cave half an hour ago. I fear Tim is having trouble on the other side, for I have heard suspicious sounds from over that way."

"Drilling, eh? That means a blow-up. Bruce, you know the cave. Take two of the men and hurry up there and see what is up. Mat and I will consult a bit on what we had best do first. If any one bothers you, down him; and call for help if you need it, lad."

Bruce left with his assistants, arriving at the mouth of the cave just as Sant Woodward emerged therefrom. The result of that encounter has been described.

While Bruce was still standing guard over Woodward and feeling rather queerly at occupying such a position regarding so prominent a citizen as Sant, the rest of the party came down the trail, Mat and Major Powell leading.

One of Bruce's men had returned to the cave for the purpose of keeping an eye on the movements of the conspirators at work inside.

"Well, Mr. Woodward," said the major, after the first instant of surprise had passed. "I am sorry, though scarcely surprised, to see you here in such a fix."

"This is an outrage," asserted old Sant, with an air as if he had determined to brazen out the affair, at least as regarded his own position therein. "Somebody shall smart for it yet."

"I do not doubt you, but I do not think it will be any of our side—eh, Mat?"

"Hardly, major." Mat approached Sant and exhibited the papers he had rescued in the cave. "Do you see these, Mr. Woodward?"

Sant scowled, yet his hard face changed color despite his resolution.

"I demand to be released!" he commanded. "What are those papers to me?"

"Whatever they are to you, they mean a great deal to me," said Mat, quietly. "I saw old Dan'l come here with them for the purpose of selling them to you. Do you want to know how he got them, Mr. Woodward?"

Sant's response was an unintelligible mumble.

"My brother saw him steal them from a secret place in my father's chest known only to Dan'l since my father's death. You might as well own up, sir."

"Own up to what? This impudence deserves a thrashing, boy!"

Mat ground his teeth, but the major cautioned him in an undertone.

"Don't mind his words. It is all he can do now—that is to scold."

"I won't," returned the youth. "But I saw him meet Dan'l this day and arrange a meeting for to-night. Dever overheard them, and they had to take those miners into their scheme. Sant was to give Dan'l two twenty-dollar gold pieces for these papers. They contain a release in full of all demands on our estate that have accrued through that deed of trust, which my dead father had really paid up before he passed away. Is it not villainous, major?"

"Looks that way, if I apprehend the business right."

"For his own vile purposes, and to gratify a mean spirit of spite and hate, Mr. Woodward has been buying up from that ignorant old negro the securities given by him to my father, apparently only for the purpose of taking away from my widowed mother her only home and source of living."

"I say, boy, that all this farrago is a lie—" began Woodward, not knowing how he could prove his assertion, but carried away by a wild, unreasoning rage, behind which, however, was lurking the thrill of a rising fear.

"Silence!" shouted Mat. "I will not allow you to insult us by such talk."

In his anger, he drew a step nearer Woodward, waving the papers as he spoke. Sant, growling hoarsely to himself, made a swift motion with his hand, seized the documents from Mat, and, tearing them in two, stamped them under his heel.

Then a blow, square from the shoulder, struck Woodward between the eyes, sending him sprawling to the ground. Mat picked up the papers without looking to see the effect of his assault. Two

men sprang upon the defeated man at a sign from Major Powell.

"Look, major," cried the boy. "Shall I kill the villain?"

He held up the torn papers.

"It is not necessary. They can be produced as good evidence in court as they are. Give them to me, Mat. Tie him, boys," to two of his own hands who were struggling with Woodward. "He acts like a crazy man."

Sounds of strife now rose from up the mountain side in the direction of the cave.

"Two of you stay with the prisoner," ordered Powell. "The rest follow me. Come, Mat. There is trouble up there. We must not forget that the mine may be in danger."

Up the hill side they climbed, two or three lanterns carried by the party having been lighted. Mat suddenly remembered the dynamite.

At this juncture came distant sounds of pistol or gun shots, as if from the interior of the mine or cave, or possibly from the mouth of the shaft.

"Forward, men!" cried Mat, forgetting Sant and his insults as a thought of the dreadful possibilities of the moment flashed through the lad's mind. "There may be some one in the mine."

At the mouth of the cave several men were hurrying forth. Two of them had another down on the ground. The last was struggling desperately. He was the one sent back by Bruce to watch the proceedings within the cave.

"Hurry up!" he cried to the new arrivals. "They have fired the fuse, and she's set for four minutes. These devils won't let me off, or I'd have been down to you before."

It afterward appeared that the watcher was overtaken by the ones he was watching, just as he was starting to alarm the major's party, having satisfied himself that an explosion was imminent.

"What will we do?" cried Mat. "There may be men in the mine even NOW!"

"It's only Regan and his bloody helpers," growled one of the Holt men, who seemed to be ignorant of the fact that others of their side might be in danger on the other side.

"Let me pass!" ordered Mat, pale as death, and springing forward as he spoke. "Don't you hear firearms? They are fighting in the mine."

Before any one could hinder, the boy pushed by all opposition, and, seizing a lantern from an open-mouthed onlooker, disappeared within the cave.

"Stop him!" commanded Major Powell, but in vain. "He is going to certain death." He turned savagely on the others. "D'ye know, you scoundrels, that it's MURDER, if any one is killed through your infernal death trap that you have so cold-bloodedly set?"

The Holt men looked scared. Some one sung out:

"She'll go off in about a minute."

There was a general stampede from the dangerous vicinity of the cave. Bruce, looking round, saw his father still standing there.

He ran back and dragged the old war veteran to a safer position, while the latter kept muttering:

"The boy has as good as killed himself. Killed himself, I say!" glaring round upon the others. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Oh, Bruce—Bruce! It was the bravest thing I ever saw done—and I fought the rebs for four years."

Then the major gave way, and tears trickled down his rugged face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT HAPPENED TO MAT LANG.

When Mat Lang dashed into Panther's Cave, he knew that he had, as it were, taken his life into his own hands voluntarily.

He might save the others, whom he felt were above that waiting death in the cavern, and in saving them he might save himself.

But—would he reach the fuse that would let fall the deadly weight on the dynamite in time?

Others without, who had stared aghast at his monumental rashness, as they felt it to be, thought he would not. Nay, even Holt's men—miners of some experience—were sure he would fail. They never expected to see the boy alive again, and they were the ones who had set the powers of destruction at work.

Once inside the cave, Mat hurried through the introductory seam to the main chamber of the cavern, and held his lantern high above his head. He saw four drilled holes in the rock, well distributed, and each with a wire protruding therefrom, that united into a final cord, which ran through an aperture in the rock somewhat to the left of the entrance.

"God help me!" he ejaculated. "Have I yet time?"

Drops of sweat started out on his face as he followed the single strand through several turns into a small recess, barely large enough for two men to move about each other in.

On a flat rock was a stick of dynamite. Over it was a heavy weight—another rock—suspended by a small cord, which led to a tall stake in the further corner, to which it was made fast.

Depending from this stake was the fuse, its lower end fiercely, though slowly, burning. The lighted end was within a foot of the cord.

When it should reach that—around which the fuse had been cunningly wrapped—the cord would be severed by fire.

The weight would fall on the dynamite below, exploding the same. The jar, communicated by the tightly drawn, charged wire that led to the other four heavily loaded drill holes, would explode these. The second shock would be tremendous, and there could be no reasonable doubt but that the whole mine above would upheave and fall in under the terrible forces thus aroused into the most violent activity.

"Thank heaven!" thought the boy, trembling as he never trembled before, "I am in time—"

But as he spoke a dreadful thing happened.

Turning quickly, his lantern swung round and crashed against the rock. A further startled movement caused the air to rush into the small hole thus made in the glass and the light went out.

Total darkness intervened, shutting the boy in like a swathing shroud, with only the sputtering noise and the dim spark of the burning fuse to emphasize the frightful terror that seized on him at once.

He groped for one instant toward the spark of red light, when the stake interposed its bulk, shutting out even that clue.

He realized that there was time to do nothing there under the dreadful uncertainty caused by the sudden darkness. He dared not linger so near. With his blood surging and with strange roarings in his ears, he ran back to the main chamber, striking a match as he went, and bruising himself against the walls as he stumbled blindly along.

He strove to relight the lamp, but it was an impossibility. He shook too much while so near that dread engine of destruction.

But the momentary gleam of the match had shown him the seam leading to the mine above, and he plunged forward, dragging the useless lantern.

How he reached the level of the mine he hardly knew. But he accomplished it in a marvellously short time.

Then he heard sounds of living men not far away.

The explosion had not yet occurred.

Then he struck another match, forced himself to apply the light, and turned the flame up high.

The blaze excited him again, and he ran forward, shouting, but carefully keeping the broken side of the lantern to the rear.

When he plunged into the group of tired combatants, a panic seized the rest.

Both victors and vanquished arose and fled down the tunnel without a word of inquiry. But one thing was said, and that by Regan.

"There's two empty dump cars in the mouth of the tunnel. Steer to the right. There's more room—"

Boom! B-o-o-o-m!

"It's like being inside the earth during an earthquake," flitted somehow through Mat's mind, even amid all the horrors of the situation.

Crashings, shakings and cavings followed. The air grew close. They ran against the end of the nearest dump car, while a succeeding series of shocks and grindings kept following one another overhead.

"Crawl under the cars, boys!" gasped Regan. "It's our only chance."

CHAPTER XIX.

A VERY CLOSE CALL.

When the explosion finally did occur, every man in the major's party, as well as the Holt men, then felt certain that Mat Lang had paid the penalty of his failure to extinguish the fuse with his life.

"Men," exclaimed Major Powell, while his voice trembled, both with grief and indignation, "I said it would be murder, and it is murder."

"How could we prevent the boy from going in?" exclaimed George Dever, doggedly.

"You fellows knew there was a strong likelihood that some one would be in the mine. Mat knew it, and he has, I fear, lost his young life in the attempt to save those whom you recklessly ran the risk of destroying in order to carry out your cursed scheme."

"He hadn't ought to have brought in the new way of mining with them Mannington hands," expostulated Waldrop. "If he'd have stuck to his old friends—"

"Old friends!" ejaculated the major, scornfully. "A pretty set of friends the like of you chaps are for any honest man! But what is the use of arguing with knaves and fools?"

"Looks like you talk pretty big, anyhow," retorted Dever, with a weak attempt at bluster.

"I'll do more than talk, my man, when we've found out the damage. You are all known, every mother's son. There'll be a constable after you, and mebbe the sheriff. Come here, Bruce."

The major whispered a few words in his son's ear. The boy then mounted his father's horse and rode away in the darkness. Sant Woodward was left under guard of two men, who took him down to where his own horse was tied.

The rest of the party was then divided. Two more of Major Powell's

hands returned to the cave to see if any entrance could be effected from there, or anything found that would show what had become of Mat.

With the others, the major hurried over the mountain top to the mouth of the shaft. The Holt men followed, in a surly, uneasy humor.

"Where is the mine mouth?" said Powell, as the lanterns flashed over a sloping surface of earth, gravel and up-turned bushes. "By George! There has been a landslide at this end."

There was no sign of Regan nor his dog, although the shanty and the lower part of the dump had escaped the down-pour of earth that had completely blocked the mouth of the tunnel, as it seemed.

A good deal of rain had fallen, and the tremendous jar of the explosion, added to the general caving in of the mine, had detached quite a portion of the steep hill side directly above the mine. In its descent the mouth of the shaft was filled in.

"What a catastrophe!" exclaimed the major. "As if the explosion were not enough in itself! This shuts out what little chance those inside might have had of escaping by this route."

But even as he spoke there rose out of the earth at his feet, so to speak, a torn and grimy figure, that staggered forward and sank exhausted under the glimmer of the lanterns.

"Dig them out!" it gasped in tones of deep exhaustion. "Some of them cannot move—I—fear."

"What—Mat?" The major clasped the disheveled form in his arms. "My dear—dear boy! Is it indeed you?"

"Raised from the dead—by thunder!" exclaimed one of the amazed miners. "It's Mat Lang, boys—alive! Three cheers for him! One—two—three!"

The hurrahs were answered by a feeble shout that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth.

"No time for talk now, men," exclaimed Mat, rousing himself. "Open the passage. It goes under the dump cars. I managed to squeeze through, but the men can't."

While Major Powell, assisted by old Dan'l, attempted to make Mat more comfortable, the others began to tear away the debris from before the shaft. Two men ran to the shanty for shovels and axes.

"Lawd! Lawd! I'ze a miserable sinner, I is!" stammered the negro, who for the last half hour had loathed himself as he felt his attachment for the family who had raised him revive. "Marse Mat, for Gawd's sake, don't die! Old Dan'l ought to be de one—ter die—not you."

Mat was bruised, exhausted and half asphyxiated by the gases and foul air he had breathed inside. His efforts to force a passage under the dump cars, after the rest of the imprisoned party had given up all hope, had also been tremendous. Only his stout resolution had enabled him to prevail. Even now his anxiety for Tim and his brother, not to speak of the others, was more keen than his own solicitude for himself.

"Call to them, men!" he urged. "Make them feel that help is at hand."

Another feeble call came from the choked tunnel. It was clearer than the first. Those outside were forcing a passage.

How those men worked, Holt's crowd, as well as the rest! These last were human, and the yearning to save the lives their criminal recklessness had so endangered amounted to almost a frenzy.

At last one limp form was dragged forth, then another.

"Brother John!" murmured Mat.

"Thank God for your life! And here comes Regan. Ah! Tim, it was a close shave, wasn't it?"

"Right you are, sorr," feebly responded the stalwart foreman, who had managed to crawl forth into freedom with his own strength, but who had to have help in order to rise up and stagger forward.

The others had all been brought out before Tim, who looked back at the small hole through which he had forced himself.

"Begobs! I feel as if I would hardly make a decent shadow, boys," he panted, while an expression of feeble amusement crossed his face. "Aye, but it was a close squeak for all of us, that time."

"And here is the lad ye may thank that you are alive this minute," said the major. "Mat, my boy, they've wrecked your mine, but the title is all right now, and Sant Woodward is in the soup. Whenever you want to repair damages and go ahead again, you shall have what money you need on your own terms. Dog gone me if you shan't!"

As the major never used swear words except in moments of extreme earnestness or excitement, Mat felt that the old gentleman fully meant what he said. And he did, as after events proved.

CHAPTER XX. THE CONCLUSION.

A big fire was built before the shanty. The exhausted and disabled men were taken there and every attention possible under the circumstances given them.

Bruce returned, and with him a number of neighboring farmers and others, whom the explosion had aroused.

On the heels of young Powell came the sheriff, together with two of his deputies. The result of this official's visit was that Sant Woodward and about half a dozen others were placed under arrest and carried to Pennsboro jail.

Sant was bailed out, but the others, including old Dan'l, remained in custody.

Meanwhile Mat and John, accompanied by the major and his son, went to Mat's house, where Mrs. Lang and the children, though alarmed at the sound of the explosion, had been happily spared a previous knowledge of the dire peril in which her sons had been placed. Tim went also, while the Mannington hands were sent in a farmer's wagon to their own boarding place.

By the following day the boys and Tim had pretty well recovered from the effects of their narrow escape. A few minor cuts and bruises, perhaps, remained; but the inconvenience of these was lost sight of in the consciousness that the plans and plots of their enemies had been brought to naught.

Ben Naylor and Shep Staines came over early, being but little the worse for their recent experiences.

By the following day Regan had them at work, with a lot of other hands, clearing away the debris before the mine and otherwise repairing the damage inflicted by the explosion.

A shifting crowd of curious spectators from Pennsboro and the surrounding neighborhood viewed the scene of the recent catastrophe, and their comments were usually in favor of Mat and strongly against the methods employed by the striking miners to right what had been termed their wrongs.

So deep was the public resentment when all of Woodward's crooked dealings with old Dan'l came out in court a month later that he was socially ostracized, and after a time he moved away.

Holt's open encouragement of the men who had engineered the scheme against Mat was also taken note of by coal consumers, with such practical effect that Mat had for months more orders for coal than he could fill, while the coal at Holt's dump remained unsold, except as he shipped it away to Chattanooga and other distant markets.

With Major Powell's substantial and open backing, Mat Lang's affairs began to prosper in a way that had not for many years been experienced by the Langs.

But the major's loans were repaid. Dick continued to be owned by Mat for a year longer, when he gave her to Lelia.

Gossip averred that it was not so much a gift as a swap.

"If the boss gets a fine girl in the place of a fine horse, who is to say that he is not getting the long ind of the trade?"

These were Regan's sentiments, furtively expressed to those among his hands whom he favored with confidential chat now and then.

But whether Regan's inference was right, especially as regarded Lelia Powell, it is hardly the thing to be too premature in deciding.

Both were young, and there was every reason why Miss Lelia's part in the transaction should not be too hurriedly consummated.

But she certainly got the horse. Indications are pointing to the fact that Mat may ultimately receive his own share of the bargain, if bargain indeed there were.

The more guilty of the Holt men received sentences of varying lengths in the county jail. George Dever and Joe Waldrop would certainly have gone to the "pen," had it not been that the district attorney, acting under earnest entreaty from Mat and John, joined the defense in a plea to the court for mercy when once a verdict of guilty had been rendered by the jury.

Sant Woodward, by remaining away and forfeiting his bond, was able after a time to obtain a remission of sentence for fraud and perjury by the payment of a fine that materially reduced his resources.

As has been said, Pennsboro became so unpleasant to himself and family that they eventually moved away.

Old Dan'l, in consideration of age, ignorance and general imbecility, was let off with three months in the county jail. But this he had to serve, the judge deeming his conduct deserving of much severer punishment.

All the Langs were touched with pity. Had he not been Mr. Lang's body servant for years? Yet all they could do was to have his punishment lightened.

The old negro felt relieved when his trial was over, and served his three months as gaily as possible.

THE END.

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